

THE VITAL CENTER

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ELECTION REFLECTIONS



**THE WOKE RIGHT AND
AMERICA'S CULTURAL
REVULSION**

John B. Carpenter

**TRUMP 2.0: IS HE
REALLY A FASCIST?**

Bret C. Devereaux

**THE TIME IS NOW:
DEFENDING DEMOCRACY
CANNOT WAIT**

Emily Hausheer



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The election is over, and the American people have made their decision: Donald Trump will once again be the President of the United States. Many are understandably concerned that the second iteration of Donald Trump will be far worse than the first. He has surrounded himself with more radical figures, including a Vice President who says he would have done what Pence would not, and who embraces the illiberal politics of Viktor Orbán, Peter Thiel, Curtis Yarvin, and Patrick Deneen.

In an article he wrote before the election, historian Bret Devereaux even goes so far to argue that if we take Trump at his word, his second term will be marked by genuine fascism. If that is the case, it is more likely to follow the latest fad in authoritarianism: Orbanization.

John B. Carpenter offers a powerful critique of the “woke” right, the mirror image of the woke left, whose misunderstanding of history distorts their politics today.

On the other side, Jacob Nestle offers some astute observations about the failures of the Democratic Party that paved the way for Trump’s victory.

One of the greatest fears surrounding Trump’s administration is the potential influence of the isolationists and Putin Tankies among his supporters and that Trump will hand the keys to the world’s autocrats. It is hard to say, as Trump is sometimes less isolationist than his rhetoric implies. In any event, Emily Hausheer shows no ambiguity in her defense of liberal democracies and about the importance of defending the world from the international network of autocrats. In particular, she argues that liberals and conservatives should unite in support of the democratic movements within those autocratic nations.

Our managing editor, Kira Ackbarali, offers some reflections on the election and on what it will take going forward to heal our nation from its current ills. Finally, I close with some short reflections about a matter dear to my heart as a Catholic and classical liberal, the vicious cycle of anti-clericalism and illiberal Catholic politics.

We hope you find it insightful.

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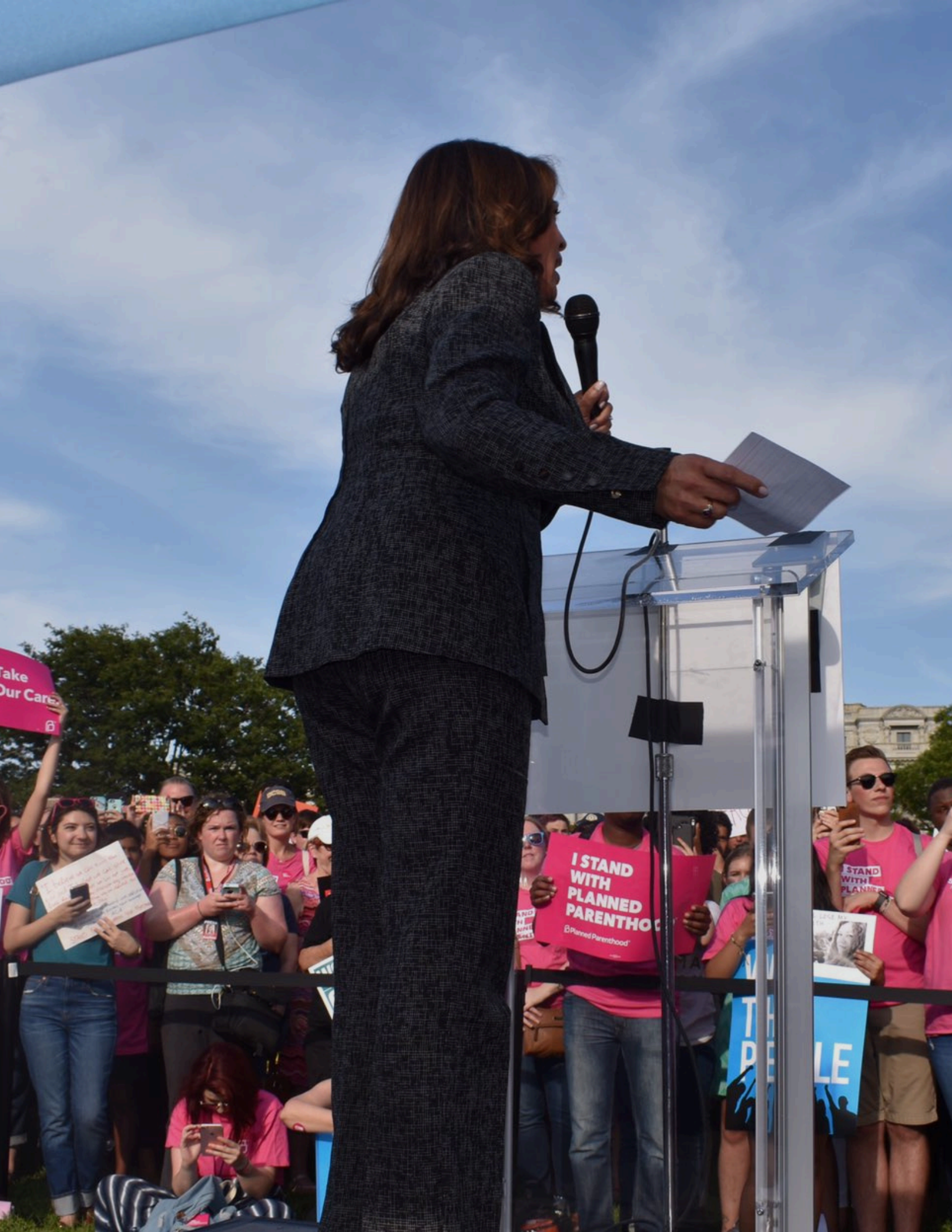
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PARTY FOUL: HOW KAMALA'S LOSS REFLECTS HER PARTY'S FAILURES

By Jacob Nestle

*Kamala Harris speaks at a rally in 2017.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons.*



Donald Trump won the presidential election in 2024, finally proving that Grover Cleveland's 1892 comeback wasn't a fluke. It proves a lot of other things too, most prominently that America's rightward turn after four years of Joe Biden is complete and visceral. We can quibble over whether the popular perception of Biden's policies is accurate, but it's immensely clear that the American people do not like the left. It wasn't just at the top of the ticket: voters chose Republicans nearly across the board, only rejecting the truly insane (like Mark Robinson); voters also chose to reject the Democratic Party in droves. Conservatives can and will take advantage of this red wave. As a believer in the power of opposition parties to keep our republic healthy, I don't want to see the Democrats fade permanently from the national stage. The Democratic Party, to survive, needs to change.

Despite what some far-left activists online would have you believe, Kamala Harris did not lose because she refused to cater to the left. She lost because of two things: her flip-flopping rhetoric in her failed 2020 primary campaign, and her refusal to distance herself from Biden's administration. The first was a failure we can lay entirely at her own feet. After a career as a prosecutor, she attempted to win the Democratic primary in part by running to the left. Leftwing rhetoric was all the rage in 2019, and Harris even went after her future running mate on the debate stage, attacking him for his imperfect record on race issues decades earlier. But it was not enough. She was forced to drop out, and it was only because Biden chose her as his Vice President that she remained at all nationally relevant over the past four years. The leftward turn she took in 2019 has come back to haunt her. Too tough on crime for the leftists and with too many leftist quotes for moderates, nearly half of the electorate came away believing she was too "liberal," in the modern sense of the word.

The second rhetorical failure, refusing to throw Biden under the bus, was more understandable but no less damaging. People have pointed out time and again that the economy is in fact in far better shape than the American people seem to think, but those statements of fact fall on deaf ears as inflation makes everyone feel like we're headed for disaster. Never mind that the inflation is at least in part Trump's fault (after all, he's the one who signed the massive COVID stimulus that began our runaway monetary policy since 2019); it is almost entirely associated with Biden. With Harris never once saying "I'd have done this differently than

Joe," she was correctly tied to his choices. And it is Biden who is blamed for inflation. Not once did she point out that as Vice President she is limited in her power. The Trump campaign was able to run ads over and over again, buoyed by her own rhetorical choices, where Harris's own voice tells the viewer that "nothing comes to mind" that she would do differently.

So we're left wondering why in the world this was not a total blowout on the scale of Reagan's win in 1984. Well, for one, Harris was running against Donald Trump, a man who inspires impressive loyalty among his allies but who alienates many others. Although he picked up significant support among, for example, Latino voters, Trump failed to replicate that among Black voters. His rhetoric is highly divisive.

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The leftward turn [Harris] took in 2019 has come back to haunt her. Too tough on crime for the leftists and with too many leftist quotes for moderates, nearly half of the electorate came away believing she was too "liberal," in the modern sense of the word.

Harris, by contrast, incorporated some strong elements into her messaging. She put forward dozens of positive ads and at least attempted to form a bipartisan coalition. She was not, herself, the one who came out and talked about Donald Trump as a fascist—that was his own former staff. She talked about reducing the cost of housing. Across the campaign she talked positively about America.

Possibly no campaign has managed to scramble as much support in such a short period of time as she did. Remember, she was handed the keys to the car in the last lap. The fact the race was close at all is a testament to the extreme schedule she kept and the rhetorical moves she did make. But a fourth-quarter

drive with the second-string quarterback is always a long shot.

Now that Harris has lost, there will be millions of think pieces trying to diagnose exactly why. They'll dive deep into the demographics. Why did Latinos take a right turn? Why did Harris still lose white women despite making abortion a core plank of her campaign? Those deep dives are worthwhile. But it's clear that Democrats have a fundamental problem on their hands: public perception. Without changing their rhetoric at a fundamental level, they will continue to be seen as chiding elites who care more about people's pronouns than reducing rents.

There is a three-step process Democrats can follow to improve how they are perceived by the public, even while remaining broadly big-government, refusing to make big cuts to welfare and taxes, and continuing to be pro-immigration and pro-choice. It won't be easy. It will require Democratic leaders with political courage and a will to win. But if it follows this process, the Democratic Party has a real chance to take back Congress in 2026, the Presidency in 2028, and to establish its role as an alternative to Republicans that moderates can feel good about voting for—not just the fallback when the Republican is too crazy.

STEP ONE: DITCH HIGH-OCTANE PROGRESSIVE RHETORIC

As established above, Kamala Harris's own record of parroting progressive talking points likely contributed to her loss. But it's important to remember that Kamala was not acting in a vacuum. She was talking progressive because she was running in a primary for a party that had been significantly influenced by its radical left wing. In 2022, voters' rejection of the left had begun, but it was as-yet incomplete. With a right-wing social media apparatus in place churning out stories of DEI gone wrong and highlighting crazy tales of Democrats' progressive vision, the average voter might not understand the ideas of Judith Butler or Ibram X. Kendi, but they know that they don't like them. Progressive rhetoric has been packaged under the label "Woke," and many—even most—normal people are sick of it. They might come around on LGBT rights as individuals, but they don't like being lectured as evil bigots for ideas about race and gender that were liberal-minded or even fringe left-wing just a decade ago. "Woke" ideas were mobilized by the critical theorists' capture of academia and suddenly thrust

upon the American people, presented as Gospel truth.

Suddenly, millions of people who thought of themselves as supportive of Black Americans and other minorities were told they were racist. Even if they were not directly affected by "woke" policies themselves, the victims of leftist cancel culture were people an average voter could identify with. J. K. Rowling is perhaps the most prominent example of a liberal woman whose anti-trans comments have led to the left turning on her. By imposing their views so quickly and forcing agreement with purity tests, the left undid its own progress. The backlash to Woke gave sudden power to the fringe online right, who have been all too happy to push their beliefs onto otherwise normal conservatives. Taking up the banner of progressive social rhetoric has led Democrats down a dark path. It's high time they jettisoned it.

As a point in Democrats' favor, many have already begun to face this fact. Pete Buttigieg didn't frame his recent media appearances in chastising moralization, but in human freedom—the same argument that led most Americans to come around on the issue of marriage equality in the first place. Kamala's campaign avoided some of the most radical progressive talking points. But until that strategy is fully absorbed by the entire Democratic Party—until the far left is locked away in a far corner to rant about the legitimacy of neopronouns and LARP their fantasies of Marxist revolution—the Democratic Party will still be the "woke" party in the eyes of many.

And it is not enough that they do this quietly. For the Democratic Party to fully and truly end their toxic relationship with the left, it cannot be a soft break-up. They cannot "ghost" the democratic socialists and the militant arms of Antifa. Democratic politicians can and should say, clearly and concisely at every reasonable opportunity, that they care about minorities and the marginalized, but that the far-left is not going to help those groups. They should not just drop the public appearances that gave millions of average Americans the impression of being scolded. They should expunge the rhetoric that blames each and every American failure on "white supremacy" or any of the myriad -phobias.

Democrats should speak with one voice to deliver a message that says America is good, we haven't been perfect but we're all in this together, and people are not responsible for the sins of others. If they do this, they will trade a million angry X/Twitter users for tens of millions of independents who will suddenly be-

come very plausible Democratic voters. That sounds like a good trade.

STEP TWO: BECOME THE PARTY OF SANE ECONOMICS

Stepping into the economic sphere, it is clear that the Republican Party has decided to jettison fiscal conservatism for Peronist populism—at least in this campaign’s rhetoric. It’s possible that Elon Musk is serious about deregulation, that Trump drops the extreme tariff talk, and that J. D. Vance’s postliberal buddies are not placed anywhere near the economic levers of power. We could, in theory, see a 180-degree turn where Republicans’ remaining rhetoric about free markets and fiscal responsibility wins out. But we shouldn’t hold our breath. This Republican campaign has been the most deficit-exploding ever. Even if the campaign promises are tempered 50 percent or 75 percent, we are still looking at a deficit that will rocket sky-high and an economy that will react accordingly.

This is bad, of course, since those are the people in power, but it provides an opportunity that Democrats should leap to take. Kamala’s plans for the economy

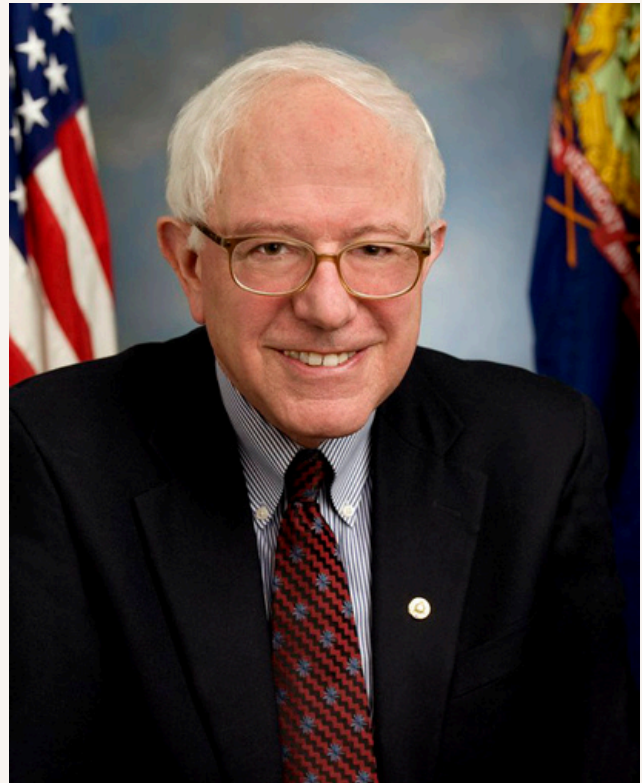
were already moving in a more realistic direction, focusing on the pitfalls of Trump’s Peronist tendencies. Democrats could take this a step further. The last President to balance the budget was Democrat Bill Clinton, and they should take their cues from his administration.

First, Democrats should ditch any ideas for handouts to privileged groups that only serve to increase the deficit. What? Don’t they prefer handouts to the underprivileged? Well, they say they do, but the Biden administration famously tried to unilaterally forgive college debt—a policy that favored the most educated and highest-earning.

They have to reject far-left and populist economic ideas like price controls and Modern Monetary Theory. Kamala made a lot of hay about her economic plan being better than Trump’s according to economists. It’s high time the Democratic Party actually started listening to serious economists, and not just those who assuage their redistributionist wing.

Kamala’s campaign did the right thing by picking up on the need to build more housing, but it was not far enough. Democrats can double down, with a platform of reducing housing costs through large-scale

“The last President to balance the budget was Democrat Bill Clinton, and they should take their cues from his administration.” “Without an economic plan that doesn’t pay lip service to Bernie Sanders, Democrats will continue to be rejected”
(Photos: Wikimedia Commons)



building projects. To make that possible, they need to highlight how they'll be cutting regulations. It's impossible to build at the scale we need while governments slow down the process with red tape.

Next, Democrats should be snapping up chances to slice off red tape, both in the government and other areas. Everyone knows American insurance systems are labyrinthine monstrosities. Instead of talking about pie-in-the-sky big-government plans that aren't even popular with the average person, they should diligently pore over the administrative state and find ways to make things more efficient. That way, whether

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They should not just drop the public appearances that gave millions of average Americans the impression of being scolded. They should expunge the rhetoric that blames each and every American failure on “white supremacy” or any of the myriad -phobias.

or not Elon Musk is actually given a federal role in cutting regulations, Democrats will be there announcing their own efforts to reduce the headaches of everyday Americans.

Finally, they should talk less about what economists think and pivot to what their economic policies actually do in an immediate sense. People don't care about the words of a bunch of people in a discipline they don't understand. Instead of dialing up the “Trump's plan is hated by economists” line, they should be talking about how they're practically helping people. Out of power and forced into opposition politics, it's easy to only focus on the disaster that, to give just one example, 200-percent tariffs would be. And while there should be Democratic voices making that case, they should likewise be putting forward ideas about how to move forward.

Without an economic plan that doesn't pay lip ser-

-vice to Bernie Sanders, Democrats will continue to be rejected. It really is “the economy, stupid,” and a Democratic Party that chooses to tolerate its members calling themselves socialists is one that will lose. It may seem impossible now, but those Democrats who still want to see a vibrant American economy must be allowed to take the reins and silence flagrant-spending plans that will just accelerate Trump's populist agenda.

Democrats should cry out for less regulation, for balanced budgets, for increasing upward mobility. Bernie-style democratic socialism that seeks to drag down the “millionaires and billionaires” is unpopular for a reason. (After all, the average American over 55 has a net worth over \$1 million.) By keeping a welfare-capitalist worldview at the forefront and openly declaring themselves as such, the next phase of the Democratic Party could help itself win elections while forestalling economic disaster.

STEP THREE: DEVELOP COMPETENT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

None of the above will persuade people to vote for Democrats at the state and national levels if every Democrat-run city increasingly looks like San Francisco. Kamala's “Nothing comes to mind” reply might have been an immediate disaster for her campaign, but it wasn't only national Democratic failures that the American people rejected. Major cities are near-uniformly run by Democrats. While only 12 to 33 percent of Americans live in urban areas (depending on how we define the term), their outsized economic role and media prominence makes every failure for a Democratic local government a potential story that could further erode national faith in Democratic governance. In other words, when San Francisco's progressive government is the subject of headlines about its recurring failures, Democrats lose potential support much further afield than Berkeley and Redwood City.

Given Democrats' long list of educated and dedicated potential local politicians, they can fill positions in urban centers far more easily than the Republicans can. Demographics help too; although they slipped with several groups in the 2024 election, Democratic

diehards continue to be disproportionately urban. Even while out of power nationally, their floor for influence in major cities is considerable. Whoever takes over the DNC in coming years should convert this weakness into a strength.

Focusing on high-level social issues like racial justice, economic equality, and gender ideology to the exclusion of practical government has led Democratic local governments into disaster. By forcing through progressive demands in places where Democrats had the consensus of support for it, the party has hamstrung its ability to govern. Ideology has led Democratic governments to become associated with homeless bums and virtue signaling, rather than a stable, sane local government that wants to help, not hinder, businesses and citizens trying to make a living. Now that there will be (if the last Trump term is an indication) an unstable, revolving-door federal executive branch, Democrats could become the party of stability in local elections.

Now, doing so requires local Democrats to be more focused on good government than on scoring internal points for radicalism. If they implement the first two steps at a local level, they will be halfway there. But that's not enough without diving deep into local politics. Democrats should put serious institutional support behind efforts to make a smart-on-crime policy that sees streets cleaned up. They should actively pursue solutions on issues like housing reform, which would deliver near-immediate benefits for citizens while creating opportunities for bipartisanship.

Movements like this are difficult because they are decentralized. The DNC can and should play a role in supporting local politicians who want to do the work and refuse to get caught up in national signaling. But this is the sort of thing that has to come, in large part, from the bottom up. Democrats should embrace a theory of change that is based on empowering local leaders to craft solutions for their communities and avoid imposing national talking points. This is also the step with the greatest long-term potential benefit

but the longest lead time on results. To make it work, Democrats should make an effort to build their organizational culture around it.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

As someone who has been variously described as a classical liberal, a libertarian, and a conservative, it would be easy for me to write a set of steps that read as their platform simply matching my own beliefs. But that is neither feasible nor would it actually create a healthy, competitive Democratic Party. I also would not ask Democrats to simply change their principles. Rather, these steps are intended as practical measures that would allow the Democratic Party to begin moving in a direction that positions them to be both short-term and long-term competitors against this conservative reaction.

These steps are easy to lay out, hard to begin, and harder to see through. They require real political courage and moderate Democrats willing to stand up to the far left. I want to see a healthy Democratic Party I disagree with sometimes, but that can win races and whose representatives are serious, respectable public servants. For that to happen, Democrats have to choose leaders who can embrace the American public's rejection of the far left. They must find a coherent economic policy and speak about it in practical terms. Both to keep from having disastrous examples like San Francisco and to build a bench of talent, they should double and triple down on efforts to make Democrat-led cities the safest, cleanest, and cheapest they can be. For the Democratic Party to survive the next four years, they must move beyond blaming the American people. They need to listen. ■

***Jacob Nestle** writes essays, fantasy fiction, and fundraising grants (not always in that order). He lives in Northeast Ohio with his wife, Madeline.*



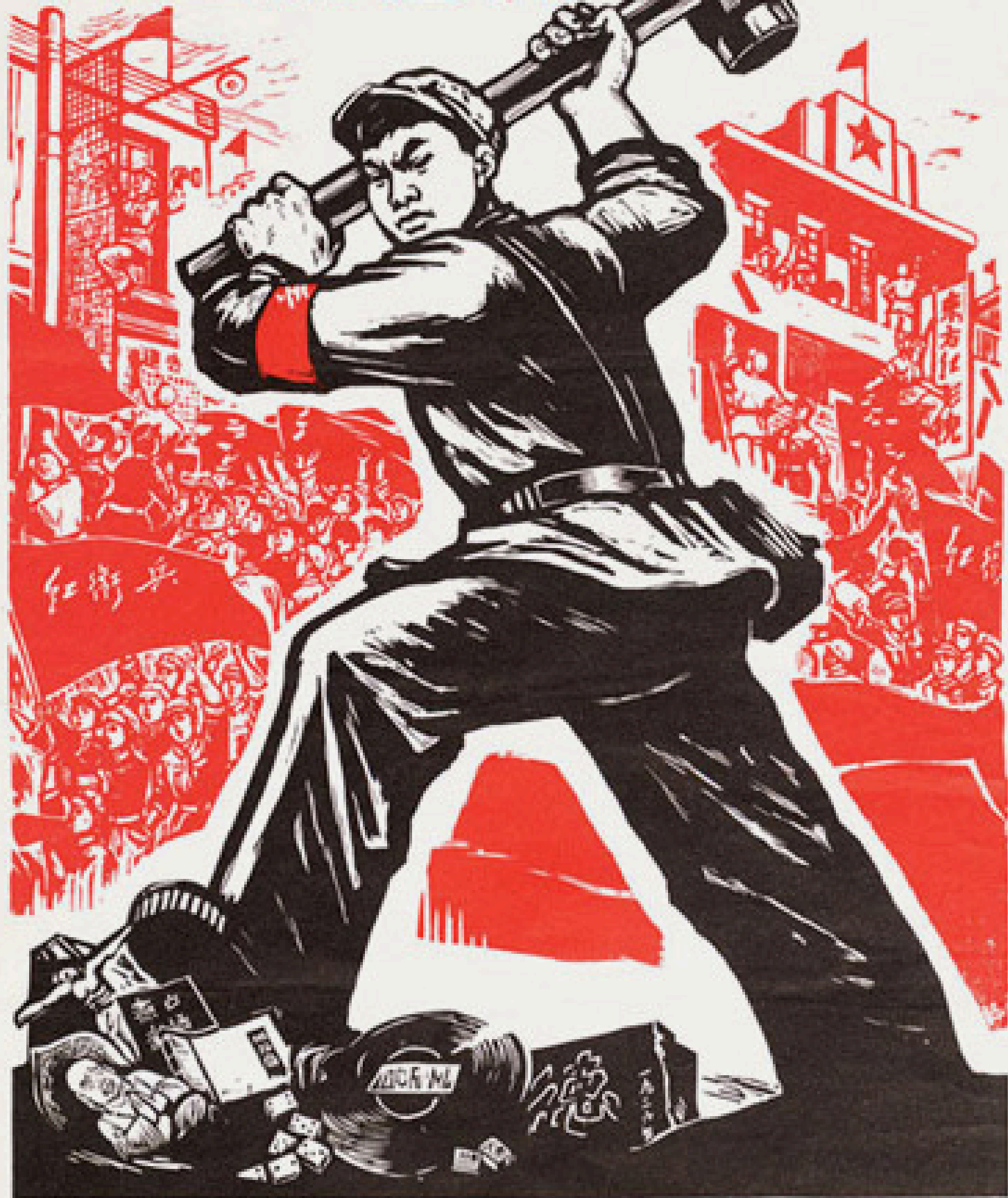
*Left: Vice President Kamala Harris addresses
the State Department.
Right: Donald Trump at his 2017 inauguration
Photos: Wikimedia Commons.*

THE WOKE RIGHT AND AMERICA'S CULTURAL REVULSION

By John B. Carpenter

*"Scatter the old world, build a new world," 1967 Chinese
propaganda poster by the Central Art Academy
Blockprint combat group (photo: chineseposters.net).*

打碎旧世界 创立新世界



In *China Marine*, Eugene Sledge reported his surprise when he learned the Chinese middle class was embarrassed by their country's Confucian heritage. Sledge, whose prior book *With the Old Breed* provided the content of much of HBO's *The Pacific*, was sent with his marine division to China after Japan surrendered in 1945. In Beijing, in the shadow of the Forbidden City, he learned Chinese people had become disillusioned with their history and culture. That poisoning of their national memory set the stage for Mao's triumph. China's cultural revolution was prepared by their cultural revulsion.

Step one to take over a country is to sully its founding myths. It demoralizes the people. In the case of China, that is tragic. Few nations have a more glorious history and culture than ancient China, the inventors of paper, printing, gunpowder, silk, the wheelbarrow—a culture characterized by scholarship and meritocracy. Confucianism is a wisdom tradition, akin to Solomon's in the Bible. The *Analects* reads like the biblical book of Proverbs. China's imperial examination system allowed bright peasants to ascend to wealth and power, achieving the Chinese dream. Few nations deserved a “cultural revolution” less than China. But the forces of cultural Marxists (or its equivalent), in their headlong pursuit of “progress,” soured the Chinese on their heritage, paving the way for Mao's murderous regime.

George Orwell said, “The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history.” If the Marxists were able to disillusion a populace with such a glorious history, could the same happen—or be happening—to us?

Before the rise of the Communist Party in China, the seeds of disenchantment with Confucian culture were planted during the turmoil of the nineteenth century. The Opium Wars and the “century of humiliation” at the hands foreign incursions and bullying (like the carving out of Hong Kong) spurred angst in the once proud empire. Marxists (or other “progressives”) took advantage. They denounced Confucianism for, among other things, its exaltation of the bourgeoisie literati at the expense of the field laborer. Confucianism was wrongly accused of producing a rigid hierarchy, in order to make Chinese history fit the narrative of Marx's theory of the oppressive bourgeoisie. In reality, Chinese culture had been remarkably meritocratic and fluid, allowing families to rise from peasantry to wealth, or vice versa, within

a couple of generations. For example, Zhang Jian (1853–1926) was born into a poor peasant family in the late Qing Dynasty. Despite his destitute beginnings, Zhang excelled in his studies, passed the imperial examinations, and eventually became the Minister of Industry and Commerce and Minister of Agriculture and Forestry. His rags-to-riches story shows how Confucian China allowed great social mobility and influence within imperial China, contrary to the poisoned, Marxist historical narrative to the contrary. But Confucian meritocracy is not compatible with Marxist claims of “egalitarianism,” which were, in fact, a disguise for its totalitarianism. So, the Marxists engaged in big-lie gaslighting by baselessly claiming that Confucian culture was the Chinese equivalent of Western bourgeoisie culture. That way, the Marxist paradigm could work, at least in the imaginations of

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*China's cultural revolution
was prepared by their
cultural revulsion.*

the propagandists. Hence Confucianism's emphasis on filial piety—the prominence of familism—was charged with stifling individual expression. (That it was replaced with a Maoist system that utterly crushed individual expression is testimony to the empty promises of Marxism.) Then the May Fourth Movement in 1919 saw intellectuals and youth, tinged with Marxist and similar ideologies, challenging traditional norms. In their impulsive rush for everything modern and new, the champions of progress allied themselves with anyone who shared their enemy, traditionalism. The enemy of their enemy (what they had become convinced was the stultified culture of Confucianism) was their friend, they thought. They would think that right up until they were shot in the back of the head, starved in a dysfunctional commune, or had a dunce cap plunked on their head and were paraded through the street. But the craze for “progress” and the reflexive distrust for all the old ways was fertile ground for the appeal of Mao's Marxism. Hence the tragedy of Mao's revolution, which wrecked one of the world's great cultures and killed up to 80 million

people, granting Mao the rank of the world's greatest murderer.

IT'S HAPPENING HERE

In 1935, Sinclair Lewis looked across the Atlantic to Germany and imagined how a similar *reich* might appear in America in his dystopian novel, *It Can't Happen Here*. Today, we should look across the Pacific to China and see how a similar cultural revulsion is indeed happening here.

Like China, even more so than China, the USA does not deserve to lose its glorious history—its myths—to the ravages of leftwing historical distortions such as the 1619 Project, claims of “genocide” against native peoples, or the obsessions about slavery and racism. Yet over the last generation, we have lived through such an attempted cultural revolution. It has so increased in ferocity over the last decade that we’ve given it a name: wokeness. It’s the last stage to disillusion us with our history and culture in the hopes that we’ll be willing to opt for a new one.

The Left’s woke ploys to twist our history, deface our heroes, and demoralize us are well-known in certain quarters. But now we face a new threat from the right. Some rightists have assimilated the strategies and reflexes of the Left while thinking they can use them to serve their agenda. They think they’ve “done the reading,” obtained the gnostic insight, and woken to the truth about American history. They tell us the American revolution was an unjust war; the constitution was a mistake; our approaches to the natives were always rapacious; the Civil War was entirely unnecessary; Lincoln was a tyrant; the USA was conned by the “warmonger” Churchill into entering World War II; our prosecution of that war was marked by “war crimes,” like bombing Dresden and Hiroshima; *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education* was an error; America’s intervention in Vietnam wasn’t just incompetently led but was maliciously intended; the “postwar consensus” was a dark plot to harness our power to further “globohomo,” and so on. Like their leftist mirror images, the purpose of all this historical fiction is to make us hate our country so we’ll be willing to tear it down and start anew, with one more to their liking. For conservatives—pseudo, semi, or alt—that ideal America was lost somewhere in their imaginary past, maybe at the Constitutional Convention, maybe at Appomattox, maybe with Woodrow Wilson or the New Deal or more recently. Meanwhile, the

leftists, like Kamala Harris, who share their tactic of deconstructing our history, see the ideal America in the future. To get us to accept their brand of the future, they have been poisoning our national memory. The disaffected pseudo-conservatives who tell—or buy—their deconstructed narrative of America feel so alienated from the United States as it now is that they are willing to take a wrecking ball to the whole myth. But they are the far-left’s useful idiots.

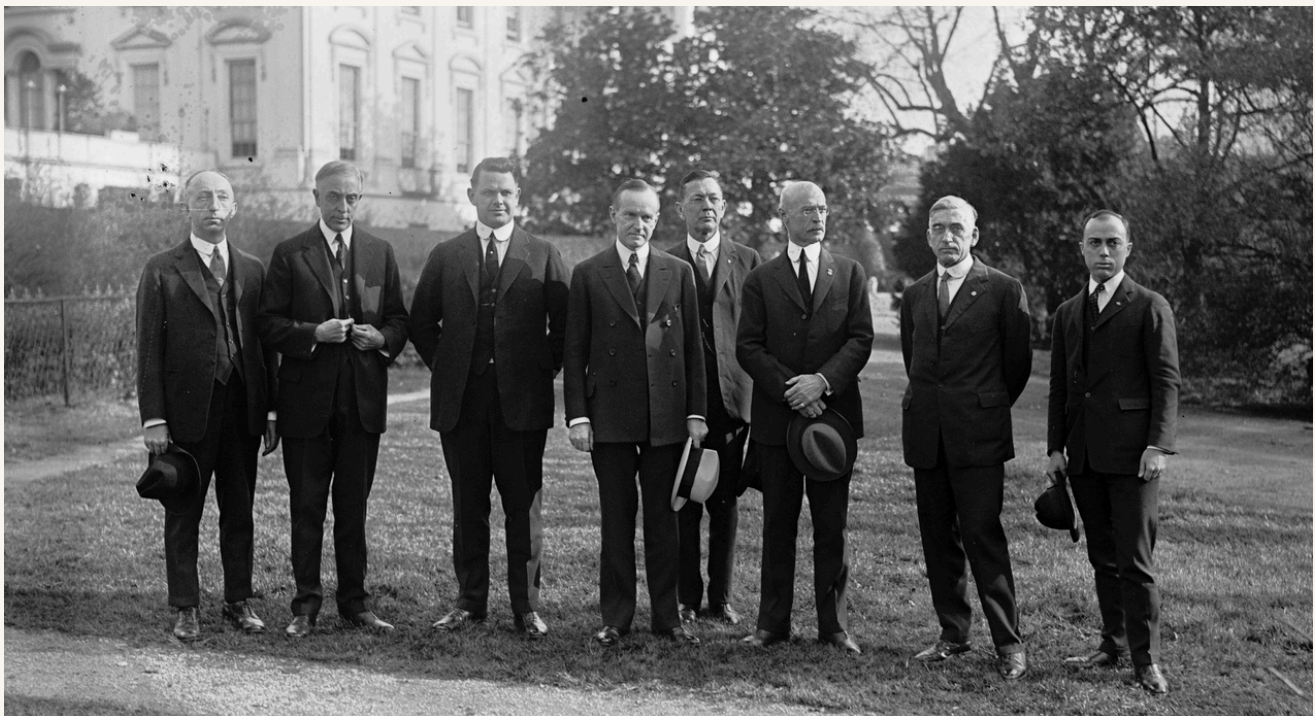
The fountainhead of pernicious anti-American propaganda is slavery. The torrent of anti-American propaganda from this fount flows in two directions. The first is The 1619 Project and its ilk. In August 2019 *The New York Times* set out to revolutionize American history by reframing the origin of the nation not as the Declaration of Independence signed in 1776 but with the arrival of the first African slaves in Virginia in 1619. Sixteen-nineteen was not just a landmark year in American history but, they declared, “the country’s very origin.” We should appreciate their honesty in exposing their agenda so explicitly. Immediately, those with even a superficial knowledge of American history should notice some problems. Sixteen-nineteen is twelve years after the founding of Jamestown. Further, Virginia had no bearing on the founding of Plymouth and the rest of New England, “the 1620 project.” The colony, though not exactly thriving, was established and surviving for a dozen years without slaves. But accuracy isn’t the point. Disillusionment is. So the conclusion is supposed to be that America is, as Matt Walsh queried, “inherently racist.” Racism is, so we’re told, America’s “original sin” and just as in the Christian doctrine of original sin, there’s no natural cure. There must be a death and a resurrection of something new.

The other direction of propaganda underpinned by American slavery is the flood of skewed history required to justify it, along with the Southern entity that was incarnated in order to preserve it. This is “Lost-Cause” Southern history, particularly regarding the Civil War, which they seriously call “The War of Northern Aggression.” When I say “they,” I mean people like me, like I used to be. I’m a descendent of Confederate soldiers, a former member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, who gather, occasionally, to exult in the glories of their lost cause to toasts of buttermilk. Non-Southern Americans tend to look on that with amusement, consistently underestimating how much distorted history is mainstreamed through Southern Lost Causism. The South was invaded, they

say. Lincoln was a “tyrant,” they insist, because he suspended *habeas corpus*. (Never mind that the constitution specifically allowed that during “cases of rebellion.”) The problems of federal government as it exists today, with its astronomical debt, growing intrusiveness, imposition of “progressive” values, like the widespread use of abortion as birth control, are laid at the feet of Lincoln and the Union cause. Even slavery itself is softened, like by claiming “slavery produced in the South a genuine affection between the races that we believe we can say has never existed in any nation before [the Civil War] or since.”[1] The podcaster Jon Harris repeated this same sentiment as recently as August 19, 2024 (c. 7:50ff.). The conclusion they intend is that the Civil War wasn’t worth it; that it did more harm than good; that it “poisoned race relations”; and that public school propaganda has misled us into believing the traditional narrative so as to maintain the Union myth. (Wilson, Wilkins, and now Harris, should consider that what really poisons race relations is slavery.) The unintended conclusion (which they are inadvertently contributing to just as assuredly as the most outlandish claims of The 1619 Project) is that America has been corrupted at its core. They’re teaching just as effectively as woke revisionist history that the foundations are shattered.

The great thing about the American myth is that it is largely historical. Sure, our heroes have blemishes. But most of our myths are real. Pilgrims really did come to Plymouth to worship God, planting the seeds of the 1620 Project, the font of real American greatness. A decade later, John Winthrop, while en route for America, really did declare that the colonists were going to plant “a City Upon a Hill.” Two generations later, Increase Mather really wrote of those founders, “It was a great and high undertaking of our fathers when they ventured themselves and their little ones upon the rude waves of the vast ocean that so they might follow the Lord into his land.” America really did have a Christian founding. Washington really was great; he might not have chopped down a cherry tree and refused to tell a lie, but he really was a man of integrity. He really did ride his horse between advancing British lines and faltering American ones to rally his troops at the Battle of Princeton (January 3, 1777). He really did step aside from the presidency, creating a precedent for the peaceful transfer of power. Abraham Lincoln really did save the country and free the slaves; he had to resort to extreme measures but he did it so that a country of the people, by the people, and for the people, might not perish from the earth. Far from being a “tyrant,” Lincoln allowed a free and fair election in wartime, in 1864. He won.

Representatives of the Sons of Confederate Veterans meet with President Calvin Coolidge at the White House on November 21, 1923. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)



And contrary to what the Lost Causers say, slavery was not going away without a fight. As Robert W. Fogel proved in his Nobel-prize winning research into slavery—misinterpreted entirely by Doug Wilson, Steve Wilkins, and Jon Harris—Southern slavery was 36 percent more efficient than free Northern farms. Propelled by slavery, the Southern economy grew at twice the rate as the that of the North in the decade prior to the Civil War. Fogel concluded that if the Civil War had not been sparked when it was—when the South (I repeat for the Lost Cause propagandists and their “War of Northern Aggression” inanity) fired upon a US military base—the South would have continued to outpace the North, adapt slavery to industrialization, and been unconquerable if a later civil war had broken out. Slavery was on the ascendancy at the outbreak of the South’s Insurrection of Racist Enslavers, or IRE (which we should be calling the

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Cooper has published zero historical books or academic articles. That’s zero, as in less than one. But Carlson presented him as an expert, telling us that the USA was a puppet of Churchill, the real “villain” of World War II.

United States’ battle against the traitors who tried to destroy it). Likely, the South, if it hadn’t been stopped when it was, would have spread slavery indefinitely. The Lost Causers will say I’m poorly educated, indoctrinated by the traditional Union narratives foisted on me by public school textbooks. They’ll insist that they’ve “done the reading.” They’ll say, like Wilson and Wilkins, that they’ve read Fogel and learned slavery wasn’t so bad. But they haven’t really done the reading. I know because I was Fogel’s teaching assistant, entrusted by him to present the lecture on slavery, grading his students on how well they understood him. I’d give Wilson, Wilkins, Harris, and other Lost

Causers an “F.” A stake must finally be driven through the heart of the as-yet undying Lost Cause, anti-American propaganda.

Recently, Tucker Carlson conjured another ghost of rightwing anti-American propaganda, that of World War II. He hosted Darryl Cooper, a blogger, whom he called “the most important popular historian in the United States.” Cooper has published zero historical books or academic articles. That’s zero, as in less than one. But Carlson presented him as an expert, telling us that the USA was a puppet of Churchill, the real “villain” of World War II. Notable historians, like Victor Davis Hanson, quickly shot down such prattle and wondered why Carlson was spending his independence from corporate media platforming it. Letting Putin ramble on about ancient Russian history is one thing. He’s a legitimately important person, even if we wish he wasn’t. But Cooper is not, and his disgrace to revisionist history was even more malignant. He seeks to tarnish one of America’s greatest contributions to world civilization, thereby, wittingly or not, alienating us from our own history.

World War II may have been, as Churchill said, Britain’s “finest hour.” But for America, it was even finer. The USA really did put down two fascist enemies at once and was so relatively humane and just that both German soldiers by the hundreds of thousands as well as Japan as a nation hurried to surrender to Americans rather than fall into the hands of the alternatives. At the end of the war, the USA really did exclusively hold the atomic bomb, the world there for the taking, yet chose instead to let peoples be free. And contrary to the poisoners of US history, the men who decided to drop atomic bombs on Japan really did make the best decision, as Eugene Sledge himself testified: “The A-bombs saved my life, saved my buddies’ lives, and most decidedly saved the lives of millions of Japanese, civilian as well as military.”[2] The USA really did stare down the Soviets at Berlin, at Vietnam, at Reykjavík, and Reagan’s challenge to tear down “this wall” was ultimately realized. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, the USA really defended its treaty partner. We really did create a global “Pax Americana.” Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew celebrated it in his farewell National Day Rally speech (1990). When China threatens Taiwan, the US sails their warships between them, telling them to settle down. When Israel is attacked by Hamas barbarians, the US sends bombs and vetoes anti-Israel UN resolutions. Todd Beamer really did say “Let’s roll” and, with the

other heroes of United 93, thwarted the terrorists. Meanwhile, we really did ensure justice at home for the descendants of slaves, and now we can do so for the preborn.

Let's heed the warning of the demise of Confucian China. Enough of the faux-conservatives judging America as not worth saving, smearing our heroes as "tyrants," war criminals, or dupes of "villains." Enough of the woke rightists who justify slavery so they can decry the United States for abolishing it. They haven't done the reading. They don't know what they are talking about. They are the dupes of the far-left's cultural revolutionary tactics. And they are wrong. ■

ENDNOTES

[1] Douglas Wilson and Steve Wilkins, *Southern Slavery: As It Was* (Canon Press, 1996), 38.

[2] Eugene Sledge, *China Marine* (University of Alabama Press, 2002), xiv.

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Darryl Cooper called Wilson Churchill "the chief villain of the Second World War" in his interview with Tucker Carlson. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

THE TIME IS NOW

DEFENDING DEMOCRACY
CANNOT WAIT

By Emily Hausheer

Photo by [Brandon Mowinkel](#) on [Unsplash](#)



“This is our time,” proclaimed Venezuelan opposition leader and political prisoner Leopoldo Lopez before a cheering international audience when he called for an international network of democracy defenders. Democracies and their defenders are more divided than ever, and the disconnect evident in the American election—where candidates appeared out of touch with voters as well as critical global issues—further highlights the problems facing modern democratic systems. For the past few election cycles, more and more Americans have been confused and feeling unrepresented by the traditional two-party system. A two-party system can only work when both parties are healthy and not influenced by aggressive auto-cratic tendencies. The fact that more Americans are feeling politically homeless and disengaged is evidence

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Over 70 percent of the world lives under autocratic regimes; within those regimes are one million political prisoners. Adopting a global outlook is one way to escape this cycle of instability.

of the desperate need for reform. Furthermore, there has been a sharp increase in Russian, Iranian, and Chinese involvement in our elections: sowing specific polarizing narratives, playing group dynamics against each other, and creating fear and threats of violence. From where I live in Washington, DC, both the Capitol and White House have become complete fortresses, and entire blocks are now boarded up due to how rampant these threats are and how quickly they are growing.

As a democracy scholar and activist researching political prisoners, kleptocracy, and autocratic networks, I emailed every single campaign including all the third-party candidates to see if any of them had an opinion on the Alliance of Autocracy—the expansive and rapidly expanding network of all autocratic countries. I

received only a few responses: the Solidarity Party wanted to learn more, and Nikki Haley and one of Kamala’s staffers appeared to recognize the threat. Neither the official Republican Party nor the official Democratic Party seemed aware of this threat, which is one of the biggest issues of our time. During all of the presidential debates, the conversations were centered around domestic issues such as the economy, immigration, or healthcare, leaving aside how these issues are all impacted by greater geopolitical dynamics and how nothing inside the United States will change unless the network of autocracy is addressed. It is also evident that both candidates were focused on culture war issues, which is a distraction from the greater international arena—and fueled by Russia. I liken this to being in 19th-century Europe and not discussing the Holy Alliance. The Alliance of Autocracy is very expansive: it is most clearly visualized in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; Russia employs North Korean troops, Chinese and Iranian weapons, as well as Venezuelan psychological operations against Ukraine. In its “election,” Venezuela leveraged extensive psychological operations, posing as supporters of Maria Corina Machado, to suppress testimonies from Leopoldo Lopez and Juan Guaido. The leader of this was not Machado but a psychological torture expert in charge of breaking political prisoners. Machado herself condemned the actions. Venezuela has shared its psychological torture tactics with Iran, Russia, Cuba, and China, who in turn are aiding Venezuela. These two examples are powerful messages about how the network of autocracy is functioning not just on a physical front in Ukraine where thousands of Ukrainians are being killed in a genocidal invasion but also in a war for your hearts and minds, as exemplified in Venezuela.

The United States is not immune. The tactics driving Americans to hate each other are suspiciously similar to tactics we have seen before, with clear evidence that Iran and Russia are amplifying extreme narratives on both sides of the political spectrum. These efforts aim to promote divisive and unpopular agendas that intimidate and alienate ordinary Americans, particularly young people. As a result, many of them are disengaging from politics, viewing it as “corrupt” and “dirty,” while the two-party system appears entirely dysfunctional. In reality, politics is no more nor less corrupt than any other sector. There are academics (especially historians), real estate agents, and businesspeople who receive money and support

from autocratic countries. Politicians must report all their financial transactions, whereas the business sector is less regulated, leaving it more open to manipulation. The pressure of ideological purity is also causing the two-party system to collapse. Many people who agreed with Kamala Harris on opposing Trump were turned away by her support of abortion, which they viewed as a human rights violation. When individuals are thus divided on issues, more people appear politically homeless.

There are, however, a few ways out of this. We need to start building coalitions with those who think differently and view politics as a civic duty. We need to get back to reading great books on civics and civic virtue, cultivating the latter in ourselves, and having more conversations, just as human beings. Likewise, we need a massive global effort to resist the influence of the network of autocracy. This should not be an ideological or one-party issue, but a concern for everyone.

We need conservatives and liberals to unite in collaboration with pro-democracy dissidents operating within autocratic regimes; they must work together to identify effective strategies to counter this network. It is essential to dismantle kleptocratic influence in business and academia while fostering stronger networks that reinforce the message: none of us stand alone. Encouraging artists, musicians, businesspeople, politicians, and citizens of all walks of life to engage in the civic sphere is vital for ending this toxic cycle. We also need more people to get involved in politics who understand how the network of autocracy is working and how we can fight back. We need individuals in every party and district to run on a platform of addressing the alliance of autocracy and a network that extends across multiple fields of interest, emphasizing collaboration. When these individuals are elected to office, they should be responsible for training and mentoring other future leaders, encouraging them to engage in these spaces and collaborate with pro-democracy activists, both from established democracies and those within autocratic regimes.

The only way for Americans to end this cycle of toxic polarization is to both reach out to their neighbors as well as to their pro-democracy colleagues around the world. Ideological issues should not be caught up in this. Charged topics such as education or social issues become so heated that people lose sight of the fundamentals: fair and free elections, freedom

of conscious, freedom from arbitrary detention, freedom of the press—essential pillars for securing human rights and democracy. When people get caught up in debating whether educational choice is a human right, whether abortion is a human right or a violation of human rights, or whether a more socialistic economy is better, we lose sight of the fundamentals. We need to regain control of democracy, and we need people on both sides of those issues to come together as we get back to the basics. We need to return to the core principles of the Universal Declaration of Rights and the fundamental tenets of democracy—values we can all agree on, without exclusion based on ideology. Over 70 percent of the world lives under autocratic regimes; within those regimes are one million political



We need conservatives and liberals to unite in collaboration with pro-democracy dissidents operating within autocratic regimes; they must work together to identify effective strategies to counter this network.

prisoners. Adopting a global outlook is one way to escape this cycle of instability. Build coalitions, create new political movements, reach across the aisle, and reach across the world. The time is now to stand against the network of autocracy.

In the Opera *Fidelio*, Florestan, a political prisoner, is languishing in a dungeon seemingly forgotten and alone. His crime? Revealing the kleptocratic corruption of Pizarro, a corrupt Spanish governor. Florestan is imprisoned for his activism, and Pizarro tries to erase the memory of him by saying he is “dead.” Florestan’s wife, Leonore, does not believe this and sneaks into the prison, disguised as a guard, to rescue him. Like Florestan, defenders of democracy around the world remain isolated, many languishing in the

dungeons of autocracy, while the world—including the 2024 presidential candidates—turns a blind eye. Is anybody out there? Are we fighting alone? When the world finally comes together and reveals the vast extent of this corrupt network, we will see that even the strongest autocracy will fall. ■

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We the People

of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Article 1

Section 1. All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

Section 2. The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members chosen every second Year by the People of the several States, and in each State shall have at least one Representative, but no Representative shall have a Term of more than two Years.

No Person shall be a Representative who shall not have attained to the Age of twenty five Years, and seven Years a Citizen of the United States, and who, when elected, shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State in which he shall be chosen.

Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and including not bound, three fifths of all other Persons. The actual Enumeration shall be made within three Years after the first Meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they shall by Law direct. The Number of Representatives shall not exceed one for every thirty Thousand, but each State shall have at least one Representative; and until such Enumeration shall be made, the State of New Hampshire shall be entitled to choose three, Massachusetts eight, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations one, Connecticut five, New York nine, New Jersey four, Pennsylvania eight, Delaware one, Maryland six, Virginia ten, North Carolina five, South Carolina six, and Georgia three.

When Vacancies happen in the Representation from any State, the Executive Authority thereof shall issue Writs of Election to fill such Vacancies. The House of Representatives shall choose their Speaker and other Officers, and shall have the sole Power of Impeachment.

Section 3. The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, chosen by the Legislature thereof, for six Years, and each Senator shall have one Vote.

Immediately after they shall be assembled in Consequence of the first Election, they shall be divided as equally as may be into three Clases; of the Senators of the first Class shall be vacated at the Expiration of the second Year, of the second Class at the Expiration of the fourth Year, and of the third Class at the Expiration of the sixth Year, so that one third may be chosen every second Year; and if Vacancies happen by Resignation, or otherwise, during the Session of the Legislature of any State, the Executive thereof may make temporary Appointments until the next Meeting of the Legislature, which shall then fill such Vacancies.

No Person shall be a Senator who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty Years, and been seven Years a Citizen of the United States, and, when elected, shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State for which he shall be chosen.

The Vice President of the United States shall be President of the Senate, but shall have no Vote, unless they be equally divided.

The Senate shall choose their other Officers, and also a President pro tempore, in the Absence of the Vice President, or when he shall exercise the Office of President of the United States.

The Senate shall have the sole Power to try all Impeachments. When sitting for that Purpose, they shall be on Oath or Affirmation. When the Chief Justice shall preside. And no Person shall be convicted without the Concurrence of two thirds of the Members present.

Judgment in Cases of Impeachment shall not extend further than to removal from Office, and disqualification to hold and enjoy any Office of Profit or Trust under the United States; but the Party convicted shall nevertheless be liable and subject to Indictment, Trial, Judgment and Punishment according to Law.

Section 4. The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by Law make or alter such Regulations, except as to the Places of choosing Senators.

The Congress shall assemble at least once in every Year, and such Meetings shall be on the first Monday in December, unless they shall by Law appoint a different Day.

Section 5. Each House shall be the Judge of the Elections, Returns and Qualifications of its own Members, and a Majority of each shall constitute a Quorum to do Business, but a smaller Number may adjourn from day to day, and may be authorized to compel the Attendance of absent Members in such Manner, and under such Penalties as each House may provide.

Each House may determine the Rules of its Proceedings, punish its Members for disorderly Behaviour, and, with the Concurrence of two thirds, expel a Member.

Each House shall keep a Journal of its Proceedings, and from time to time publish the same, excepting such Parts as may in their Judgment require Secrecy; and the Yeas and Nays of the Members of either House on any question shall, at the Desire of one fifth of those Present, be entered on the Journal.

Neither House, during the Session of Congress, shall, without the Consent of the other, adjourn for more than three Days, nor to any other Place than that in which the two Houses shall be sitting.

Section 6. The Senators and Representatives shall receive a Compensation for their Services, to be ascertained by Law, and paid out of the Treasury of the United States. They shall in all Cases, except Treason, Felony, and Breach of the Peace, be privileged from Arrest during their Attendance at the Session of their respective Houses, and on going to and returning from the same; and for any Speech or Debate in either House, they shall not be questioned in any other Place.

No Senator or Representative shall, during the Time for which he was elected, be appointed to any civil Office under the Authority of the United States, which shall have been created, or the Emolument whereof shall have been increased during such Time; and no Person holding any Office under the United States, shall be a Member of either House during such Time.

The first page of the US Constitution, the framework of American democracy.

TRUMP 2.0: IS HE REALLY A FASCIST?

By Bret C. Devereaux

Firefighters work to extinguish the Reichstag Fire of
1933 (Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons).



Is Donald Trump a fascist? Ever since radio host Charlamagne tha God argued in an interview with Vice President Kamala Harris that Trump's campaign "is about fascism," the debate in the final days of this presidential campaign has turned to this question. Republicans argue that it is out of line to call Trump a fascist, while CNN's Jake Tapper pointed out that Trump himself regularly uses the term to describe his opponents. But far more important than questioning the propriety of the label is the question of whether the man seeking the highest office in the land is in fact espousing a fascist platform and ideology—and if so, how should voters approach the profoundly consequential decision of who ought to wield the executive power of the most powerful country in our time?

Now we ought to be clear at the outset: **we are not asking if the Republican Party is fascist** (I think, broadly speaking, it isn't), **and we are certainly not asking if you are fascist** (I certainly hope not). **But I want to employ the concept of fascism as an ideology with more precision than its normal use** ("political thing I don't like") and in that context, ask **if Donald Trump fits the definition of a fascist based on his own statements**, and if he does, what that means. It is question of sufficient complexity to merit discussion in a longer-form context than slogans or tweets, because fascism as an ideology is nearly as complex as it is reprehensible.

Now the response from some folks is going to be anger that I am even asking this question and demands for me to "stay in my lane." To which I must remind them that the purpose of history and historians is, as Thucydides put it, to offer "an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human affairs must resemble if it does not reflect it" (Thuc. 1.22.4). **This is my lane**. Goodness knows, I'd much rather be discussing the historical implications of tax policy or long-term interstate strategy, but that isn't the election we're having. And if hearing about these events is unpleasant, well, Polybius offers the solution: "men have no more ready corrective of conduct than knowledge of the past" (Plb. 1.1.1). We must correct our conduct.

1933

The names of Mussolini and Hitler have become such bywords for evil in general conversation, peers to the Dark Lord Sauron or Frieza, that they need to be demystified to a significant degree to be useful for

understanding human affairs and our momentum, because these men did not appear suddenly as the villains we now know them to be. There were *plenty* of signs of what these men might do once in power, before they had it, but they did not stride on to the stage dressed in spikes and black robes. These were men, not wizards with mind control powers, so it is worth asking **why people were so foolish to entrust them with power**—to the near universal ruin of everyone involved.

The politics of interwar Germany (that is, Weimar Germany) were complicated and unstable, and this isn't the place for a full discussion of them. What I want to focus on are a few things. First, **Hitler never commanded majority support**. This is common for populist authoritarians—while they claim to speak for "the people," they generally only speak for their own supporters, who are almost always a minority. The NSDAP (that is, the Nazis) won just 37 percent of the vote in July of 1932 and then fell to 33 percent in November. In both elections, the Nazi party's share was fairly closely matched by the pro-Republican center parties (the SPD + Centre; 34 percent in July, 32.3 percent in November) and exceeded by the combined total for the left (SPD + KPD, though the KPD, following directives from Moscow, focused on undermining the SPD, rather than the Nazis). Even in March of 1933, when Nazi stormtroopers were in the streets attacking political opponents and shuttering opposition newspapers, the Nazis only managed 43.9 percent of the vote.[1]

Instead, Hitler gained power not because a majority of Germans agreed with his aims but because key leaders, most notably Franz von Papen, thought they could use Hitler to achieve their aims, that they could sand off all of the nasty rhetoric and instead employ Hitler as a cudgel (against the socialists). The Nazis encouraged this: in 1933 they initially moderated some of their rhetoric, particularly the anti-business rhetoric and Hitler negotiated early in '33 with business leaders to clear the way for his appointment as chancellor. The antisemitic rhetoric never *went away*, but it was, for the convenience of the moment, deemphasized to make it easier for elements of Germany's traditionalist, monarchist right (von Papen was no "liberal conservative," but rather an anti-democratic opponent of republicanism) to go along.

It was a lie, of course.

The moment a convenient excuse arose—the February Reichstag fire, an arson attack that did not kill or

injure anyone, did not disrupt the function of government (as the parliament was not present at the time)—Hitler first persuaded President Paul von Hindenburg to pass the Reichstag Fire Decree, enabling Hitler to suppress political opposition by suspending key political liberties, which he used to jail many of the deputies of the KPD (Communist) and SPD (Social Democrat) parties. Hitler then proposed the Enabling Act of 1933 in March; with much of the political opposition jailed, he only needed the Catholic Centre Party to get the necessary votes. He got them by promising to let the Centre Party continue to exist, to protect Catholic religious liberties, to retain their civil servants, and that the powers of the Enabling Act would be temporary.

It was a lie, of course.

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If you had asked in me in 2016 if Donald Trump was a fascist, I'd have said no. I'd have said no in October of 2020 too; authoritarian tendencies, perhaps, but not a fascist. Donald Trump's rhetoric has changed, however, in a way that puts him firmly in this category, satisfying not just parts of the definition but every part of it.

Within three months, all political parties—including the Centre Party, which had received those assurances—were banned. Hitler wasted even less time setting up the first concentration camps, which were established in March of 1933. Of course, the “temporary” measures all became permanent, and when Hitler was done purging his enemies, he set about purging his allies. While Mussolini's road to power a decade earlier differed in many ways, it shared some key elements. Mussolini's fascists were not electorally successful before he seized power: the combined *Blocco Nazionale* of which Mussolini's *Fasci Italiani* were just one party, got just 19 percent of the vote in 1921. Instead, in October of 1922, Mussolini marched

on the capital with 30,000 fascist thugs to demand the dissolution of the government; the actual elected government asked the king (Italy was still a constitutional monarchy at the time) to give assent to allow them to disperse the march, but the king, Victor Emmanuel III, refused, believing that the fascists could be controlled, could be useful in restoring order and clamping down on the socialists. He then invited Mussolini to form a government.

Mussolini in turn demanded the legislature pass a law giving him dictatorial powers—term limited, just a year, he promises. Meanwhile, in power, Mussolini turned a blind eye to the violence of his own fascist thugs, the *Squadristi*; when Giacomo Matteotti denounced the violence, he was murdered. Mussolini's support for the blackshirts ensured they knew they could inflict violence on the opposition without fear; when three of Matteotti's murderers were convicted, Mussolini ensured they were promptly pardoned by Victor Emmanuel III.[2] Aided by the violence and intimidation, the following month Mussolini passed the Acerbo Law, rewriting Italy's electoral system to guarantee his party an overwhelming majority, employing a wave of intimidation to secure victory. By December 1925, Mussolini had effectively dismantled Italy's democratic systems, both concentrating power in his position and making it effectively impossible for him to be removed.

What I want to note here are two key commonalities: **First, fascists were only able to take power because of the gullibility of those who thought they could “use” the fascists against some other enemy** (usually communists). Traditional conservative politicians (your Mitch McConnell and Lindsey Graham types) and conservative business leaders (your Elon Musks) fooled themselves into believing that, because the would-be tyrant seemed foolish, buffoonish, and uneducated that such an individual could be controlled to their ends, shaped in more productive, more “moderate,” more “business friendly” directions. **They were wrong**; many of them paid for their foolish error with their lives (Victor Emmanuel III paid for it with his crown). Mussolini and Hitler would not be “shaped,”—they would be exactly the violent, tyrannical dictators they had promised to be—to the total and utter ruin of their countries.

Note that these men were not exactly subtle about what they wanted to do. *Mein Kampf* is not a subtle book. But they both knew how to promise violence to

their followers while prevaricating to their temporary allies; **be wary of the fascist who promises violence in his rally speeches but assures you that if you just give him power, he won't hurt anyone** (except the people you don't like)—because it is a lie, of course.

Second: once these fascist leaders were in power, it was already too late to stop them. Precisely because fascists had no respect for democratic processes and the rule of law—things they had declared openly when seeking power—once in power, they were unconstrained by them and swiftly set about converting all of the powers of the government into a machine to *keep them in power*. **And the conversion from democracy to dictatorship was remarkably swift;** in Italy, Mussolini marched in October of 1922, rewrote the election rules in November of '23, and by December of '24 had effectively dropped even the pretense of democracy—just two years. Hitler was faster: appointed chancellor in January 1933, by March of that year he had suspended constitutional protections and ruled by fiat—just three *months*.

The time to stop an authoritarian takeover of a democratic system is before the authoritarian is in office, because once they are in power, they will use that power to *stay in power*, and it becomes almost impossible to remove them without considerable violence (and is difficult to do even with considerable violence).

That, however, creates a tricky situation. With most political ideologies, voters can adopt a strategy of judging by outputs: “if you don't like the current government's policies, let these other fellows here have a go at it and see if they do better. If not, you can always vote them out next time.” **But with fascists and other authoritarians there may not be a next time,** and this strategy fails: by the time the *actions* of the fascists make it clear they are dangerous, it is too late to vote them out.

This is why it is important to listen carefully to what fascists say and what they promise and, most importantly, to take their threats of political violence and authoritarianism seriously.

Which is not to say that everything on the right is fascism (just as not everything on the left is its own authoritarian variant, communism). Ronald Reagan was not a fascist, nor was George H. W. Bush or George W. Bush or John McCain or Mitt Romney. They were conservatives within the liberal tradition (again, “liberal” here in the old Jefferson-Locke-and-Washington sense). Most Republicans today are not

fascists, although a distressing number appear ready to repeat Franz von Papen's mistake of assuming they can achieve their goals through an alliance with fascists. *Only the devil wins such a devil's bargain.*

How is one to tell the difference? ***Listen to the things they promise to do*** and understand that they may speak out of both sides of their mouth: promising violence to one audience and then toning down their rhetoric to another. **But politicians speaking from within the tradition of liberty don't need to speak that way, because they don't promise violence in the first place.**

Listen for the promises of violence, the promises to suspend press freedoms, the promises to persecute political adversaries, and when you hear them, believe them.

All of which brings us to the main question: what is Donald Trump promising, and is he a fascist?

“

Most Republicans today are not fascists, although a distressing number appear ready to repeat Franz von Papen's mistake of assuming they can achieve their goals through an alliance with fascists. Only the devil wins such a devil's bargain.

IS DONALD TRUMP A FASCIST?

There are a few ways of answering this question.

One option, of course, would be to simply look at what the former President's closest advisors think. John Kelly, Donald Trump's longest serving Chief of Staff (and a retired USMC general), a man who worked from 2017 to 2019 to see Trump's policies enacted and who presumably agrees with many of them, says that Donald Trump is a fascist and “certainly prefers the dictator approach to government,” a position echoed by other former Trump aides and endorsed by Donald Trump's own former National Security Advisor, John Bolton, though Bolton has added he thinks Trump is too

stupid to be truly a fascist (the same was said by cleverer men about Mussolini and Hitler). James Mattis (also a retired USMC general), who served as Trump's handpicked Secretary of Defense from 2017 to 2019, described him as "mak[ing] a mockery of our Constitution." His next Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, agrees, saying that *if one looked up the definition of a fascist*, "it's hard to say he [Trump] doesn't fit that definition." Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Trump described him as "fascist to the core." Trump's handpicked former Vice President refuses to endorse him, in part due to "differences on our constitutional duties that I exercised on Jan. 6," which is a polite way of saying Trump demanded Pence steal an election and Pence refused.

Indeed, an unprecedented number of Donald Trump's closest, handpicked aides and advisors have refused to endorse him, many warning publicly that Trump is a danger to democracy. It is rare for *any* advisor or official so close to the president to refuse to endorse them; nearly *half* of Trump's have so refused.

But sure, let's say you don't believe any of those fellows, handpicked men who worked with Donald Trump closely. **Let's say you won't believe anyone except for Donald Trump himself and maybe his handpicked running mate J. D. Vance. On that standard is Donald Trump a fascist?**

First, we need a definition; for this exercise to have any use, fascism has to be a lot more specific than "politics I don't like." There are quite a few, but we can start with a simple dictionary definition, this one from Merriam-Webster:

a populist political philosophy, movement, or regime (such as that of the Fascisti) that exalts nation and often race above the individual, that is associated with a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, and that is characterized by severe economic and social regimentation and by forcible suppression of opposition.

So, we can assess Trump's rhetoric and his promises against these points:

- **Exalts the Nation and Often Race Above the Individual**
 - Donald Trump claims immigrants are "poisoning the blood of our nation," a turn of phrase used by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. He also vilifies racial or quasi-racial groups: Nazis spread libels about Jews, Trump falsely

spreads baseless rumors about Haitian immigrants ("they're eating the dogs, the people that came in, they're eating the cats"), warns his followers that "Your children are in danger. You can't go to school with these people [immigrants], these people are from a different planet." In his first campaign, he promised what he described as a "Muslim ban."[3]

- There are plans to operationalize these views, including the creation of mass detention (concentration?) camps to facilitate mass deportations, which Trump has made clear will include at least some immigrants currently in the country legally.
- **Check**
- **Associated with a Centralized Autocratic Government Headed by a Dictatorial Leader**
 - This one is almost too easy: Trump says, "You're not going to be a dictator are you?" I said "No, no, no, other than day one." And later, "I only want to be a dictator for one day." Please scroll up to see how other grants of "temporary" dictatorial powers to fascists turned out. It is a claim he has reiterated, rather than softened.
 - The United States' federal structure is meant to provide a brake against this sort of thing, but Trump has shown irritation with that too, as when he withheld wildfire aid to California because it was a blue state and aggressively deployed federal law enforcement in 2020 to states he felt were being insufficiently harsh toward protestors.
 - **Check**
- **Severe Economic and Social Regimentation**
 - Did we mention the "largest deportation operation in American history"? And promises to invoke the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 (one of the Alien and Sedition Acts you learned were bad in high school) to remove suspected (not convicted) foreign nationals.[4] As noted, actually *carrying out* this plan would involve very severe and expensive efforts, including armed federal law enforcement fanning out across the country hunting people down.
 - Trump also proposes to radically restructure the US economy through an across-the-board 20 percent tariff on all goods entering the

United States, discouraging trade. That's actually a very traditional fascist economic policy: fascist governments tend to favor "autarky"—closed, self-sufficient economic systems (Adam Tooze in his book *Wages of Destruction* goes in to extensive detail on Nazi dreams of autarky), though they don't generally achieve autarky because it turns out that it is a terrible economic system that doesn't work very well. Still, massive across-the-board tariffs certainly seem to count as severe economic regimentation.

- **Check**

- **Forcible Suppression of Opposition**

- This is by far the most important component of the definition and the one that is the easiest to document in Trump's own words.
- Trump has said that there is an "enemy within," which he would handle with military force. Asked to clarify who he meant as the "enemy within" he has clarified that he means political opponents like Nancy Pelosi and Adam Schiff. Asked to back off this rhetoric, he has instead doubled down on it, expanding his "enemies" to include the press. He's also threatened members of the January 6 Select Committee, declaring that "they should be sent to jail" and is now on social media threatening to prosecute anyone he claims "cheated" against him, keeping in mind that Trump falsely claims he was cheated in the last election, a point on which no court in the land agrees.
- Note as well how the Italian fascists suppressed political opposition not through state action but through state *inaction*—by refusing to stop their squads of violent thugs who were intimidating and murdering opponents. Likewise, Trump has promised repeatedly to pardon the January 6 insurrectionists, "on day one,"—effectively a promise of impunity for his most violent supporters.
- Trump has also recently begun threatening news outlets, declaring CBS' decision to run Harris' 60 Minutes interview "so bad they should lose their license, and they should take '60 Minutes' off the air." Again, it may seem absurd *but authoritarian leaders do take opposition media off the air*. This isn't new—in 2017 Trump as President said NBC's license "must

be challenged and, if appropriate, revoked."

- That is, of course, part of a broader strategy of threatening the media into silence, one that appears to be working. This week reports are that both the *LA Times* and the *Washington Post* have opted not to run endorsements despite strong support for Harris in the newsroom, reportedly because their owners fear retaliation from a second Trump administration.
- **Check.**

Is Donald Trump a fascist? *By his own words, yes. Donald Trump is telling you that Donald Trump is a fascist and on this point—and almost no other—I think you should believe Donald Trump.* I feel I should note, if you had asked in me in 2016 if Donald Trump was a fascist, I'd have said no. I'd have said no in October of 2020 too; authoritarian tendencies, perhaps, but not a fascist.[5] **Donald Trump's rhetoric has changed**, however, in a way that puts him firmly in this category, satisfying not just parts of the definition **but every part of it**. He has become a fascist and when he tells us that about himself—we should believe him.

But a dictionary definition is thin gruel, you might say. Surely there is a more careful and detailed definition, of the sort an academic might use, against which we could assess Trumpism as an *ideology* to ask if it is fascist, right?

IS TRUMPISM A FORM OF FASCISM?

And indeed, there is. **The most common taxonomy of fascism you will see in most academic circles is that advanced by Umberto Eco in his essay "Ur-Fascism," copies of which you may easily find online.** As with most things academics like, it is complex and a bit fuzzy. Eco notes that precisely because fascism tends to be anti-intellectual and fundamentally emotive (rather than rational), it is "fuzzy" set and defies easy classification. As Eco notes, fascism as a set is somewhat like the series of "abc bcd cde def" in which all of the elements are clearly a family and yet in freely remixing core elements, it is hard to identify a single set of necessary components.

Now, dear reader, if you are already revolting against such a fuzzy definition, remember, you need merely scroll up to see Trump's rhetoric assessed against a much more fixed definition.

Thus instead of a single definition, Eco proposes a

taxonomy of fourteen points that collectively make up the “type group” of fascism. An ideology doesn’t need to have every point in order to qualify as fascism, but the more criteria it satisfies, the more firmly it fits into the definition. Likewise, individual points can also be fuzzy or borderline—it is the *cumulative* fit that matters—after all, most ideologies have effectively *none* of these attributes, so an ideology that clearly has many and sort of has a few more actually fits the mold quite well. We could quibble about where to draw the fascism/not-fascism line, but let’s walk through the criteria first, for reasons that will become clear.

Now we should be clear that we’ve changed what we are focusing on: not just “Trump” himself (that’s above), but **Trumpism**, the ideology that has emerged around him, his movement. Trump himself may not be very ideological, but no one rules alone—he will have to staff an administration (and he certainly won’t be staffing it with establishment Republicans again!) and those folks are ideological. In essence, we’re asking about the ideology that animates Trump *and his allies*, the sort of worldview that, say, Heritage was hunting for when vetting thousands of resumes. Once again, my goal here is to classify Trumpism not based on how outsiders see it but based on what Trump and his close (current) allies *say about themselves*. I am taking them **in their own words**.

1. The Cult of Tradition, particularly a syncretic traditionalism that latches on to various iterations of an idealized past, even mutually incompatible ones. Trumpism’s core slogan, “Make America Great Again,” certainly qualifies as both nostalgic but also syncretic—it doesn’t specify when America was great or how to return to it, so the listener can insert for themselves whatever outgroup they want purged or changes they want reversed.[6] Was the wrong turn globalization and wokeness (as per Tucker Carlson) or the loss of America’s “Christian Identity” (as per many Christian nationalists) or perhaps women’s suffrage (as per J. D. Vance’s funder, Peter Thiel) or childless cat ladies (as per J. D. Vance himself) or actually the ideas of the declaration of independence (as per Trumpist intellectual Patrick Deneen). That syncretic structure is, as Eco notes, normal for fascism (whereas other traditionalist ideologies are often less syncretic and more particular about what tradition they hearken to). **Check.**

2. The Rejection of Modernism, specifically, in Eco’s mind, a rejection of “the Enlightenment, the Age of

Reason [...] seen as the beginning of modern depravity.” Here we could easily reuse a number of our examples from the above paragraph, bemoaning women’s suffrage, modern international trade, and modern culture (be that “wokeism” or simply the existence childless, unmarried women). But I think this rejection of modernity is clearest in the “anti-liberal” or “post-liberal” move in Trumpism’s intellectual wing—thinkers like Adrian Vermeule, Curtis Yarvin (noted by J. D. Vance as influences; Vance has described himself as “postliberal”) and the already-mentioned Patrick Deneen and Rod Dreher (currently living in self-imposed exile in postliberal Hungary; Dreher describes J. D. Vance, positively as representing “American Orbánism,” referring to the openly illiberal ruler of Hungary). For these thinkers, the point at which the American experiment went wrong is not FDR’s New Deal or Obama’s presidency, but the founding and indeed even before the founding: the problem was liberalism itself, the ideal of individual freedom advanced by John Locke and coded into our founding documents. Naturally, this sort of ideological argument doesn’t get a lot of time in Trump’s stump speeches, but **the selection of J. D. Vance**—who does see himself as an intellectual and has been openly postliberal—as a running mate speaks to the importance of this element in the ideology of Trumpism. **Check.**

3. The Cult of Action for Action’s Sake, which for Eco is really a rejection of intellectualism, thinking, or consideration; a despising of experts, intellectuals, and universities: don’t *think*, just *do*, and *hate the thinkers*. Here, of course, we can see claims by Trump that he trusts his “gut” more than his advisors, “more than anybody else’s brain,” as well as his habit of sparring with his own experts during a pandemic. But equally it is J. D. Vance declaring that “the universities are the enemy.” **Check.**

4. Disagreement is Treason. This is easy to see in the way the movement treats otherwise doctrinaire conservatives who reject Donald Trump on personal grounds, figures like Charlie Sykes, Mitt Romney, David French, Liz Cheney, Dick Cheney, Jonah Goldberg, Bill Kristol, Adam Kinzinger and so on, who end up driven out of the party or out of conservative publications (like *National Review*) because Trumpism cannot tolerate dissent in the ranks.[7] At this point Mike Pence gets a warmer regard at Harris rallies than at Trump rallies, despite remaining a very conservative republican and not endorsing either

candidate. Liz Cheney can sit on stage opposite Harris and note they have considerable disagreements, while Trump won't campaign with Nikki Haley, despite the latter endorsing him. Check.

5. Fear of Difference. This is a movement that began with false claims that Barack Obama was foreign born, advanced with promises of a “Muslim ban,” and has proceeded to lies about Haitian immigrants and claims that immigration is “poisoning the blood of our nation.” It is also a movement that is deeply hostile to non-traditional gender expression, something of course expanded by Vance’s commitment to the idea that more Americans’ family patterns should look like his. Check.

6. Appeal to a Frustrated Middle Class. This may be the single best-documented part of the entire movement. Indeed as studies have tended to show, Trump and Trumpism’s core of support is not necessarily the poorest Americans, but rather from “the elite of the left-behind [...] who were doing well within a region that was not,” voters who fear a loss of status, rather than a lack of it, a truth expressed in his boat parades and other expensive shows of political devotion. J. D. Vance, “a populist and proud of it” is fairly explicit about this appeal, arguing that the source of that Middle Class’s frustrations are free trade and immigration.[8] Check.

7. The Obsession with a Plot. Another easy one, given both the prominence of Q-Anon in Trump’s early rise and its replacement with baseless conspiracy theories about the “stolen” 2020 election—claims that are openly peddled by Trump and the sine qua non of being in his inner circle. Such conspiratorial thinking also surrounded the baseless claim that Hillary Clinton’s emails were on a secret server in Ukraine and of course, going all the way back to the birther conspiracy about Obama’s citizenship. Sometimes these conspiracies are openly promoted by Trump, sometimes they congeal around him, but they are ever present to the point of producing a “crank realignment” where even previously left-coded conspiracies are drifting into Trump’s ideological camp. Check.

8. The Deceptively Strong/Weak Eternal Opponent. This one is complicated, but fascism conjures an “enemy” who is at once too strong (thus requiring the power of the fascist strongman to defeat and whose continued existence can justify continued mobilization and authoritarianism) and yet also degenerate and weak: thus the Nazi view that Jews were racially inferior, weak and cowardly, but also that they secretly

controlled all of the world’s most powerful countries. For Trumpism, the clearest version of this is the “deep state” (sometimes “the swamp”), which is both so powerful as to require Trump to dispel and yet not powerful enough to prevent his election. Alternately it might be “wokeism” and the “radical Left” often identified as a mixture of government workers, academia, and journalists (Curtis Yarvin—an acknowledged influence for J. D. Vance, see above—labels this “the Cathedral” and defines it as journalists plus academia).[9] For the conspiratorially minded, this deceptively strong-and-weak enemy is often just a nebulous “they.” And sometimes the conjured enemy is [...] just actually the Jews. Check.

9. Life is Permanent Warfare, as Eco puts it, “there is no struggle for life, but rather, life is lived for struggle.” This is harder to pin down, especially because Trumpism is not focused on external conquest (hardly disqualifying, note Salazar and Franco), but the motif is evoked quite obviously in Trump’s, “we’re going to win so much, you may even get tired of winning, and you’ll say please, ‘it’s too much winning, we can’t take it anymore’ [...] and I’ll say ‘no it isn’t, we have to keep winning, we have to win more.’” More broadly, Trump’s victory in 2016 and four years as president aren’t pointed to as having resolved any of the issues it was supposed to address; after all, in 2020 the wall wasn’t built, the swamp wasn’t drained, but this wasn’t a sign of failure, but a sign of the need to fight more. And certainly Trump’s rhetoric—“We fight like hell. And if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore”—frames politics as a fighting struggle, though of course a lot of political rhetoric does this (to my annoyance). More broadly, Trumpism’s positioning as battling essentially against the forces of modernity and pluralist society in a staggeringly diverse country effectively requires constant struggle against the nebulous “them.” Check.

10. Contempt for the Weak. Donald Trump doesn’t like disabled reporters, he doesn’t like soldiers who get captured, he doesn’t like soldiers who get injured; his speeches instead stress the need to show strength while attacking his opponents as weak; likewise Trump’s insistence that he is very smart (“mentally strong,” we might say), while his opponents are supposedly “low IQ” (“mentally weak”). Mirroring this, his supporters have produced a veritable flood of artwork showing the elderly and somewhat obese Trump as a literal strongman, far fitter and trimmer than he actually is. More broadly this fits into a fascist disdain for pity—

the weak are to be culled, not aided—that extends through the treatment of refugees, a belief that foreign aid is “stupid,” and a generally transactional vision of foreign policy where the United States does not aid countries because they might deserve well of it, but only because the United States (or Donald Trump) receives concrete benefits in return. **Check.**

11. The Cult of Heroism. This is perhaps the least developed element of the fourteen points, but here too we are not without examples. The elevation of Kyle Rittenhouse to a heroic figure, including a meeting with the former President and a speaking tour for Turning-Point USA, a youth-oriented conservative/trumpist organization, seems a clear example. But the far stronger example is the mythology that has built up around the January 6 “political prisoners,” with Trump praising Ashli Babbitt, shot storming a barrier inside the Capitol building and describing those arrested and charged with crimes as “warriors” “political prisoners,” and “unbelievable patriots.” He even recorded a rendition of the “Star-Spangled Banner” with the “J6 Prison Choir,” called “Justice for All,” which he’s used to open some of his rallies. I am reminded of the way that the failed Nazi coup of 1923, the “Beer Hall Putsch” became itself a sacred event in Nazi mythology, with new recruits required to touch the flag, the Blutfahne, carried at the putsch. **Check.**

12. Machismo, which as Eco notes, encompasses both “disdain for women” and “condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits.” Machismo is a constant element of Trump’s persona, from the infamous Access Hollywood recording (“grab ‘em by the [...]”), a long list of objectifying comments about women, and of course a long history of sexual harassment and assault. But it’s more than Trump’s behavior, it is part of the ideology: Tucker Carlson just recently characterized Trump returning to power as a “Dad [...] and he’s pissed,” coming home to say “you’ve been a bad little girl and you’re getting a vigorous spanking right now,” which is simply this trope played straight (notice how the upside of a Trump presidency isn’t that he will do good things, but merely that he will wield violence against those Carlson thinks deserve it); Carlson has been on this beat for a while, as with his 2022 “End of Men” documentary. Likewise Vance’s repeated comments about childless women (and childless people in general)—that people without children are “more sociopathic” “most deranged and most psychotic,” that the “whole purpose of the

postmenopausal female” is to help raise grandchildren (a statement Vance did not say himself but agreed to) and so on. **Check.**

13. Selective Populism: fascism claims to speak for “the People,” but in reality, only some of the people and not through democratic, majority-rules systems; rather, the Leader channels the Common Will, which is taken as the Voice of the People, even when it contradicts the actual votes of the people. Donald Trump, of course, claims repeatedly to speak for the majority—often borrowing Nixon’s phrase the “silent majority”—of Americans, stresses his crowd sizes, and has not yet won the popular vote or even ever come particularly close to doing so. Having lost the 2020 election by 74 electoral votes and 4.5 percent of the popular vote, he claimed “frankly, we did win this election.” He continued to claim that, and indeed, still claims it now, because in the fascist ideological frame, it is the Leader who speaks for the People, not the voters. Of course for this to work, all sorts of people must be written out of The People as not “real Americans” and Trump is all too ready, claiming illegal immigrants are voting, a claim echoed by the Trump-aligned Heritage Foundation (which is without merit) and of course by framing political opposition not as “real Patriots” but as the “enemy within.” **Check.**

14. Newspeak, which Eco identifies both in changing the meaning of words, often inverting them, but more broadly, I think Eco is getting at here what Orwell sums up in his famous line, “The party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command.” Thus the January 6 rioters become “political prisoners,” the riot itself—in which 174 police officers were injured—was a “day of love,” an election Trump clearly lost becomes the “stolen election” while his narrow victory over Hillary Clinton (in which he lost the popular vote) he describes as a “landslide.” A modest inauguration crowd becomes the largest ever—and official photos are edited to conform. An incorrect statement about the path of Hurricane Dorian (that it would hit Alabama) had to be “made true” via some sharpie-induced edits to the map. **Check.**

Fourteen out of fourteen; some are clearer and stronger fits than others, but every element is present to a significant degree. Keep in mind, this is the sort of taxonomy where a regime that, say, satisfied ten or twelve out of the fourteen would still be generally regarded as fascist and the ideology we might call

So Donald Trump is a fascist; he is promising to do fascist things, like the violent suppression of opposition. The ideological movement he leads, which we've termed "Trumpism" here, is quite clearly a species of fascism, fitting every point in the most common taxonomy of the ideology.

Where does that leave us? Well, first it is important to note that **it is not the case that the entire Republican Party is fascist or that every one of Trump's supporters are fascists**. I know too many of both and many have a wide range of reasons why they might be considering "holding their nose" and voting for Trump despite concerns about his character. But nearly all of those concerns **assume that this won't be the last round and that in four years, they'll get a chance to trade Trump out** for some other Republican who doesn't have these problems, this baggage. They're thinking in terms of being positioned for the next election in terms of policy, tax rates and so on.

And I want to caution against that thinking here, **because, as we've seen, that's not how fascism works**—and as we've shown, Donald Trump *is a fascist leader, leading a fascist movement*. In his first term, Trump's administration was shaped and constrained by many of the fellows I quoted above now who are trying desperately to warn the republic about his true nature—they will not be in a second term. Instead, the Heritage Foundation, *part of the Trumpist fascist movement*, has spent the last four years preparing up with a plan to fire huge portions of the federal civil service (who are not political, at-will appointees) and vetting thousands of resumes to find cadres of modern American brownshirts to fill the jobs so that Trump's impulses are not so constrained.

And what then? As President, Trump could do as he has promised and pardon the January 6 insurrectionists, putting his violent street soldiers back on the streets. He could turn the Department of Justice, staffed with his pre-vetted brownshirts, against "opposition" media—as he has threatened—while favoring platform whose owners support him politically. He could turn a blind eye while his loyalists (who he has promised to pardon) use violence to intimidate his political rivals, while his government sets up massive detention camps for illegal immigrants—and maybe "accidentally-on-purpose" groups that favor his political opponents.

There is an irony that in "Ur-Fascism," as Umberto

Eco cautions, "it would be so much easier, for us, if there appeared on the world scene somebody saying, 'I want to reopen Auschwitz, I want the Black Shirts to parade again in the Italian squares.' Life is not that simple." **But in practice, Trumpism is that simple**, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. But I know it's hard to hear; one doesn't *want* to believe it.

Do I think this effort will inevitably succeed should Donald Trump be reelected? No. The American system is a fair bit more resilient to this sort of takeover than the Weimar Republic or the Kingdom of Italy, **but resilient is not immune**—such an effort could succeed and *even if it failed* could do tremendous damage. Fascists, after all, rarely leave power without violence—this one didn't leave office non-violently last time, you will recall. And please believe me when I say I do not want this to come to violence, by anyone, at any point. As I've said before, attempting to "win the stasis"—the Greek word for political violence—by out-violence-ing the opposition is a losing game that just tears apart the social fabric.

But it is not yet 1933. It is still 1932: the train has not left the station yet. It is possible for the fascist's path to power to be blocked without violence, just with votes. And then in four years we can be certain that we'll have new a chance for new leadership—almost certainly new conservative leadership, given the way political opinion shifts in the United States. For conservatives, appalled by what your party has become, I understand if you cannot vote for Kamala Harris, with whom you disagree so strongly, though I would note fellow citizens every bit as conservative as you have found it in them to do so simply to take a stand against what Trump has become, and while Trump has promised to use the military against his political opponents, Harris has promised to put Republicans in her cabinet. But if you absolutely cannot stand to vote for a Democrat, write in a name, leave the top of the ballot blank. **But do not sign your name to this.**

Because from this point forward, you may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say that you did not know.[10] And while right now you may have many reasons and many concerns, if you sign your name to this fascist and a fascist government takes power as a result, your many reasons will no longer matter. No one really cares what Franz von Papen or Victor Emmanuel III or NSDAP or Blocco Nazionale voters were concerned about or their pet issues. It no longer mattered. Once a fascist government took

power—they were fascists.

And that was all that ever mattered.

Do not let that be all that matters about you. Show the world that we have learned something in the last century and need not endlessly repeat the mistakes of the past. ■

ENDNOTES:

[1] Of course, in parliamentary systems, outright majorities can be rare. But given that the Nazis were going to outlaw *all the other parties* by November of 1933, it seems notable that at no point did a majority support this course. And yet it happened.

[2] As an aside, this is normally where the “what-aboutists,” realizing the parallel, will insist that Donald Trump’s promises to pardon the January 6 insurrectionists are somehow matched by Democrats being unwilling to prosecute violence during the George Floyd Protest. **The problem with this argument is that it isn’t at all true:** Biden denounced the violence when it happened and the Biden administration didn’t drop prosecutions of violent Floyd protestors and continued to investigate and convict them, as did blue-state governments. The Biden-Harris administration has shown itself quite willing to prosecute its political allies when they break laws, including the Democratic mayor of New York, Senator Bob Menendez, Representative Henry Cuellar and, oh, yes, the President’s son, Hunter Biden. So the equivalence here collapses in the face of the evidence: one candidate promises to pardon their supporters for crimes, the other candidate promises to prosecute the law equally.

[3] It is worth noting that Trump often claims that immigrants are causing violent crime, but in the United States immigrants commit violent crimes at rates far lower than the native born population. As

with Nazi blood libels against Jews, the racism is based on lies.

[4] Note that for *convicted* foreign national criminals, he wouldn’t need the Alien Enemies Act—the entire point of invoking that is to be able to imprison and deport without trial.

[5] I do not believe that any major party presidential candidate in my lifetime except Donald Trump qualifies as either a fascist or a communist. Bush was not Hitler (though his foreign policy was not always good), Obama was not Stalin. I am not, nor have I ever been the sort of person who tosses these things around lightly.

[6] Indeed, anyone on social media for any amount of time will encounter this with Trump-supporting right-wing accounts that cannot agree if the idealized past was ancient Rome or the Crusades or the 1950s or the 1980s or the 1990s. What they agree on is that it *isn’t right now*.

[7] Contrast the continued, robust presence of leftists, liberals, and even conservative NeverTrumpers in the Democratic coalition who have sharp criticisms of Harris and Biden.

[8] A point on which few economists would agree.

[9] For a *precis* on Yarvin’s ideology, this podcast will serve.

[10] William Wilberforce, in a speech to the House of Commons.

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BEYOND THE PRESIDENCY: HOW TO HEAL THE NATION'S DIVISIONS

By Kira Ackbarali

A Night Alarm: The Advance! by Charles West Cope, oil
on canvas, 1871. Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons)



On a bizarrely warm November morning, Americans awoke to a second Trump presidency, making the 45th and now 47th POTUS the second President in US history to enjoy two nonconsecutive terms. Many people on center-right as well as the left rushed to express their fears that a second Trump term will be a more dangerous reality than his first. Indeed, many of us have observed that he has selected cabinet members primarily based on their personal loyalty to him, removing an immediate check on his power and trading off with more important considerations like competency; his campaign promises have taken a more extreme turn; and he has frequently expressed admiration for dictators.

But other pressing matters, such issues as partisan division, waning social and institutional trust, and rising extremism, go far beyond just Trump. Today I

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A healthy democracy requires a party that is broadly liberal and one broadly conservative. It thus benefits everyone if both major parties are functioning well.

write to those on the center-left and the center-right who share these concerns. I ask, how do we, as individuals and as a nation, move forward to protect our republic?

CHALLENGES FACING THE LEFT AND RIGHT

I do not pretend to have all the answers, nor is it my intention to lecture. My goal is to contribute constructively to finding a path forward. Unlike Trump, we must respect the results of a free and fair election. The president-elect not only won a majority of the electoral votes but also the popular vote, leaving little ambiguity. Consequently, the #resistance strategy of 2016 and 2017 should be avoided. This approach not only proved to be counterproductive but it

but it desensitized Americans to Trump's unique crimes on January 6th. Americans must move forward with Trump as their next commander-in-chief, hoping for the best, preparing for the worst.

For this to happen, both left and right need a reckoning. A healthy democracy requires a party that is broadly liberal and one broadly conservative. It thus benefits everyone if both major parties are functioning well. Given their recent defeat, the left will have to recon first. I do not just mean taking stock of where Harris's campaign went wrong strategically. They will need to listen with an open mind to the very voters they have been hemorrhaging: the oft-referenced white working class of course, but also Black, Latino, and Indigenous voters—particularly men. In his article for *Intelligencer*, self-described leftist Sam Adler-Bell eloquently expressed how the progressive left has come to assume its own conclusions as clear moral righteousness and thus abandoned the work of actually convincing voters. Only through such reflection can the left hope to rebuild a broader coalition that will both advance their values and win elections.

As for the right, sooner or later they will have to grapple with the nature of their role as America's conservative party, which I would broadly define as upholding foundational American principles, such as freedom and limited government, in a changing world. Conservatives will thus need to ask themselves whether this mission is compatible with the populist turn the Republican party has taken, though there is not the space to explore that question here.

It is also far from obvious that the loyalty to the MAGA movement will outlive the aging Donald himself. Even his highly successful children do not have his charisma. Demographics, moreover, are shifting. The Republicans have a golden opportunity to pick up more of the disaffected left, including more women and nonwhite people. In short, they must not limit their outlook to only this most recent election; they must expand it to encompass the long-term vision of their party and country.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS CAN DO

The major parties have their work ahead of them, but most of us have limited influence over their actions. In an era marked by stark divisions and the alarming rise of extremism and authoritarianism, what practical steps can individuals take? Those of us with more moderate sensibilities must resist the urge to

fight fire with fire. Instead, we should steadfastly uphold our core principles and channel our efforts into constructive action. This commitment can be fulfilled in three main areas: voting in primary and local elections, building local communities, and prioritizing education.

First, we can make a point to vote in every primary election for which we are eligible. Each vote carries more weight than it does in the general election due to typically low turnout: only 20 percent of voters participate in the presidential primaries. To understand the real-world implications of low voter turnout, consider the case of Doug Mastriano, Pennsylvania's Republican gubernatorial nominee in 2022. Mastriano, a QAnon conspiracy theorist who denies the results of the 2020 presidential election, lost handedly to the more moderate Democrat Josh Shapiro in the general election. Low turnout enabled the nomination of a polarizing figure like Mastriano, whose extreme rhetoric alienated moderate voters and led Republicans to withhold support, sealing his defeat. Indeed, this is just one example showing how too many of us are leaving a small but critical bit of our power on the table.

Another key area individual voters can exert influence is in local elections. This is the level on which issues shaping most Americans daily lives are handled, such as the selection of sheriffs and school board members, as well as public-school policies and zoning laws that affect housing prices. The latter is also highly consequential on the national stage, as rising housing costs deeply affect Americans' perceptions of the health of the national economy—a key driver of turnout for the 2024 presidential election.

As stated above, the notion that one vote does not matter for primary elections is dubious. But some will argue that primaries are the domain of the far left and far right. First, it is actually a misconception that primaries at large are usually dominated by extremist voters. And even in locales where it is, the need for moderates to make their voices heard is that much greater. Ahead of the election, X/Twitter was full of sarcastic jokes saying something like, "Both of these candidates are so amazing I'm having trouble choosing between them," jokes that rely on a widespread understanding that both Trump and Harris were considered poor options. So let us take steps toward a future where both candidates are broadly acceptable—two people the half of the country can at least live with.

But voting on its own is not enough—building strong local communities is equally vital. We must talk more to our friends, family, and neighbors, especially those with very different perspectives from our own. One simple way to maintain community ties is to host weekly dinners with other individuals or families. A friend of mine hosts discussions at her home for friends who disagree on contentious issues to discuss and to better understand each other's perspectives. Now, I'm not saying that everyone needs to go to that extreme; in fact, it could do more harm than good if we are unequipped to moderate such a discussion. But most of us are generally able to support our isolated neighbors, and in so doing, make ourselves less isolated. Not only is this right and rewarding, but it may save people from falling into political extremism.

Another essential tool is education, both for ourselves and the next generation. As we continue to build up our small communities, we need education to

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*History, properly read,
is a remarkable story of
human resilience.*

understand what liberal democracy is and why it leads to better outcomes than other systems of government. While learning from past mistakes of the West, we must also ensure that our children understand its merits.

Indeed, education must also tackle the dangers of misinformation and social media, especially among youth. In the age of social media we have less face-to-face interaction but are never truly alone, never in our own company. Gen Z does not know a world without social media, and this is even truer of today's young children. YouTube is full of videos aimed at toddlers. The average TikTok user is between eighteen and twenty-four years old. There is ample documentation of hostile foreign governments of countries such as Iran, China, and Russia using social media to drive polarization. Online misinformation and rage-baiting is certainly not exclusively a problem among youth, but bear in mind that their brains are still developing

(we can't know the full impact that unfettered screen time will have) and also it is easier for parents and policymakers to regulate what is directed at minors.

As a parent myself, I understand the pain and sometimes the futility of simply removing fun things. That is why I believe that noble efforts to eliminate misinformation and foreign interference will be worthless unless we provide a better alternative. Finally, we need to invest in our non-political hobbies, particularly ones that produce beautiful or useful things or experiences for others to enjoy. To exit the culture war, we need to build a more attractive alternative.

Such seemingly small, individual efforts seem trivial to policy-minded folks. They are, however, vital for fostering a society where people generally trust each other. And trust is essential to a healthy democracy—crucial for channeling the rising political interest of recent years into constructive actions and away from the unproductive anger that dominates current discourse.

As we anticipate, or come to grips with, the direction this nation's leadership is headed, let us remem-

-ber to take the long view of history. The USA is more than one election. It is more than what has occurred since our parents and grandparents were born. This country has endured beyond its initial revolution and England's attempt to take it back. It has endured Civil War, the rise and fall of slavery, economic depression, two world wars, and the forging of its identity in the flames of tensions between diverse cultures—and it emerged as the world's superpower: a superpower to which the huddled masses still flock.

History, properly read, is a remarkable story of human resilience. It is not an arc that bends upward but a long and winding path with peaks and valleys, stretching far past antiquity on one end, and deep into the unknown on the other. The United States will forge ahead. Let us not despair but instead use our talents to build a more perfect union going forward. ■

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Battle of Antietam by Thule de Thulstrup, September 17, 1862, one of the deadliest days of the American Civil War: just one of the many dark days the USA has weathered. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

ILLIBERALISM AND ANTI- CLERICALISM

A BRIEF REFLECTION

By Thomas D. Howes

*Ruins of the San Agustin Church, destroyed in the Spanish Civil War.
Photo courtesy Adam Jones, via Wikimedia Commons*



I have been watching Saturday Night Live again for the first time in years. Its election skits were funny and the impersonations all very impressive, especially Jim Gaffigan as Tim Walz. But it was a sketch following the election that struck me.

In an entirely political context, unrelated to religion, Colin Jost used a discussion about Catholic support for J. D. Vance as an opportunity to take a random jab at Catholic priests. Specifically, Jost quipped that Vance, a recent convert, should not call himself a Catholic unless he had endured life as an altar boy. There appeared a real picture of a younger Jost, raised Catholic, dressed as an altar server. The implication was clear: altar servers are constantly in danger of predator priests.

Now, I do not know Jost's experience as an altar server or with the Catholic faith, so this is not meant



Anti-clericalism, although an understandable reaction to illiberalism among Catholics and their clergy, is both unjust to the innocent clergy caught in the crossfire and serves only to escalate the problem of illiberalism.

as a criticism of him. Nor do not pretend to be a victim here. If such jokes only affected sexual abusers, they would not bother me at all. But they hurt innocent priests as well. As an opponent of collective punishment and a friend to many good priests, I am not a fan of these jokes. Most priests are not predators and have made great sacrifices to serve others. They should not be punished for the crimes of predators who go into the priesthood for the worst reasons—just as public-school teachers should not be punished for those who abuse their positions.

But the political context of Jost's joke was not incidental. Catholic support for illiberal politicians, this time J. D. Vance, was the context for anti-clerical

humor. This should come as no surprise: for over two-hundred years, anti-clericalism has been a common response to illiberal Catholicism, and vice versa. But as a Catholic, I am not only troubled by the fact that people blame Catholics for supporting politics they disagree with; what bothers me even more is when the Catholics are not totally innocent for the politics they support.

A VICIOUS CIRCLE

Colin Jost's joke was in response to Trump's victory, and in response to J. D. Vance. The latter's reputation as a practicing Catholic combined with his poor public behavior—such as scapegoating single women and Haitian immigrants—invites an anti-Catholic and even anti-clerical response. That concerns me both as a Catholic and as someone who likes living in a free society.

My studies responding to postliberalism have made me especially attentive to the history of modern Catholic reactionary thought. In the context of continental Europe, for instance, much of what makes the Catholics joining reactionary groups understandable was the anti-clericalism of their republican opponents. I have in mind especially the rapport between republicans and reactionary conservatives in France and Spain.

But the anti-clericalism was itself somewhat understandable. It was a reaction against the illiberalism of many Catholics and their clergy. When the leading Jesuit journal was supportive of limits to Jewish emancipation, there was clearly a problem of reactionary political thought among the clergy in continental Europe—something that was much less a problem among the Irish-American Clergy in the USA.

So there was something of a vicious circle. Classically liberal politics was associated with anti-clericalism, and that led to more reactionary thought among Catholics and the clergy, while the association between illiberalism and Catholicism (and its clergy) led to more anti-clericalism. The clergy, recall, held a privileged place in the old regime—a privilege many of them wanted to maintain. And the further removed the clergy became from the old regime, the more romanticized the old regime became.

Fast-forward to the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. By the end of this conflict, both sides looked like the bad guys in different ways. Although the reactionaries

started the violent conflict, republicans eventually destroyed their credibility as innocent victims by resorting to the murder of thousands of innocent priests and religious. Vice on both sides predictably escalated into an intolerable conflict.

A LESSON FOR BOTH SIDES

It is important that we learn the right lessons from these conflicts. Anti-clericalism, although an understandable reaction to illiberalism among Catholics and their clergy, is both unjust to the innocent clergy caught in the crossfire and serves only to escalate the problem of illiberalism.

In my experience as both a classical liberal and a Catholic, I have seen this dynamic play out. The Obama administration's targeting of the Little Sisters of the Poor for lack of compliance in all parts of the insurance mandate (despite the legal protection of the RFRA), particularly as regards the coverage of contraceptives that the sisters argued were abortifacients, was a substantial grievance that contributed to the reactionary response of my Catholic friends.

But the reactionary response, which showed itself politically in their support for candidates like Donald Trump and J. D. Vance, has understandably angered liberals even further.

This will not end well. My "postliberal" Catholic friends cannot reasonably expect their support for more illiberal politics to lead to less anti-clerical and anti-Catholic prejudice. And my liberal friends cannot expect an anti-clerical or anti-Catholic response to do

anything but further radicalize Catholics. If we do not want to end up like Franco's Spain, both sides will need to learn grace.

We Catholics should be especially attentive to the call to be the salt of the Earth. This obliges us to seek to be blameless and to avoid contributing to politics that relies on cruelty and scapegoating, or that shows little reciprocity with our fellow citizens. We have a special command to be peacemakers. Embracing illiberal politics that is tribalistic and cruel to outsiders will only invite more hatred of the Church and its clergy. But even worse than that, it will make us worse Catholics.

We will always be hated by some. But it is much better that we are hated for doing what is right than understandably hated for doing what is wrong. Therefore, it is imperative that we Catholics support better politics than today's illiberal populism.

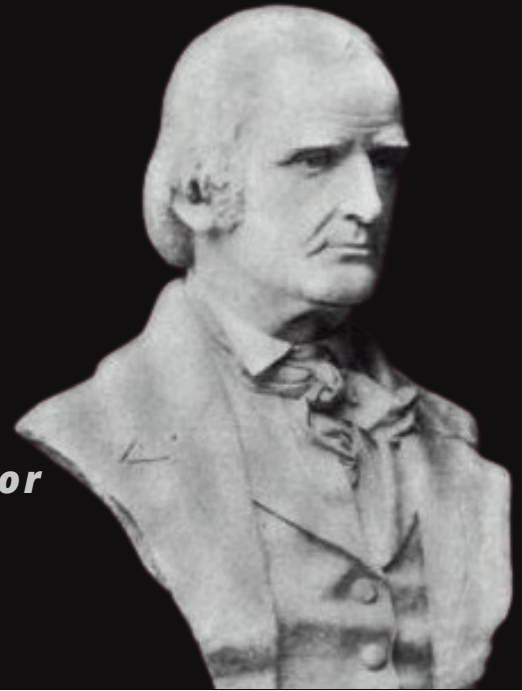
And if the liberals do not want it to get worse, they will be more discriminate in their response. ■

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REVIVING RANKIN

A Review of Caleb Franz's *The Conductor*

By Garion Frankel



I rvin Yalom, a former psychiatrist at Stanford University, once said that “some day soon, perhaps in forty years, there will be no one alive who has ever known me. That’s when I will be truly dead—when I exist in no one’s memory.”

The vast majority of us—even, and perhaps especially, those of us in the intelligentsia—spend our lives in relative insignificance. But just because the vast majority of us do not spend our lives with fame or the unyielding adoration of the masses does not mean we were not important or that we failed to do a great amount of good for a great number of people. The families we build, the communities we serve, and the friends we make determine our legacies—and they do more for our memory on Earth than we do ourselves.

However, America’s historical memory sometimes drops the ball and forgets people who dramatically altered the course of history for the better. In those circumstances, it is up to us to revive their legacies and give them the credit they deserve. It’s a tall order, but it can be done. *The Conductor: The Story of Rev. John Rankin, Abolitionism’s Essential Founding Father*, by Caleb Franz, is no less than a triumph in that regard.

Rankin was one of the earliest and foremost members of America’s burgeoning abolitionist movement. From his base in Ripley, Ohio, the Tennessee-born Rankin crossed paths and often influenced heavy-

weights like Salmon P. Chase, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and his eventual friendly rival in prose and method, William Lloyd Garrison. Even Ulysses S. Grant was under Rankin’s tutelage at one point. He used the power of the pulpit to condemn slavery as a moral crime, started a school for freed slaves, and may have helped as many as two thousand slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad in his own right.

And yet American collective memory has completely neglected Rankin—at least until Franz’s book. Rankin remained somewhat famous among members of his Presbyterian faith, and retained folk hero status in southern Ohio, but his legacy rarely left these secluded havens. If Franz’s book has one weakness, it is its lack of an answer to this question—how did someone with such an outsized impact on American history fade from view? Even if no one can pinpoint the answer, it is still a question worth greater inquiry.

Nevertheless, Franz masterfully portrays Rankin as he was: an ordinary man who was devoted to the cause, even at noteworthy personal cost. For example, at one point, he was wanted dead or alive in the state of Kentucky with a \$2,500 bounty (equivalent to nearly \$85,000 in today’s money). This would later be compounded by Ohio’s own fugitive slave law, which carried a penalty of \$500 and six days in jail—and Rankin’s home was a known, hilltop safe haven for escaped slaves.

Rankin’s fervent and unabashed abolitionism even caused a temporary schism in the American Presbyt-

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[Rankin] used the power of the pulpit to condemn slavery as a moral crime, started a school for freed slaves, and may have helped as many as two thousand slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad in his own right.

erian Church. Rankin had long advocated that slaveholders be expelled from the church, and when his efforts failed, he spearheaded a Free Presbyterian Church that would hold firm to abolitionist principles. Had Rankin so desired, he was in a prime position to establish an entirely new denomination and create a place of theological distinction for himself with the American Christian world.

Rankin, however, demurred. Franz writes that in the aftermath of the 13th Amendment's ratification, "much to his satisfaction, Rankin oversaw the reunification of the First and [Free] Presbyterian Church in Ripley. Without slavery, there was no longer any need for a Free Presbyterian Church." When given an opportunity to increase his fame and influence, Rankin chose instead to rebuild his church and his community. To see power and refuse to take it requires an immense amount of courage and fortitude, and Rankin had them in spades.

He also passed many of these virtues and values on to his family. Rankin had thirteen children, eleven of whom survived him. Two of his sons became ministers, another a captain, and yet another a physician. One son, Adam Lowry Rankin, became an equally vociferous member of the abolitionist movement, though

at least five of the Rankin children would help their father on the Underground Railroad at one point or another. The family remained close, posing together for a photo as late as 1872.

In any case, what struck me most about Franz's work is that he took the same care in illuminating Rankin's death as he did with Rankin's life. When Rankin died in 1886 at the age of 93, he was mourned by much of his family, as well as Ripley's now-burgeoning Black community. Franz writes that "nearly everyone in town had their own reason to revere their finest citizen."

A local newspaper, which Franz allows to stand on its own accord, argued that "in almost every town in the southern part of the state, the voice of Rev. John Rankin was heard in strong and fearless utterance against the curse of slavery, and for a quarter of a century he lived to see the slaves free men. He has at last passed to his rest above. His name will ever live in history and in the memory for whom he did so much."

Those for whom Rankin did so much held up their end of the bargain. Six years later, the people of Ripley gathered in celebration to dedicate a bust of Rankin above his tomb—a bust carved by his own granddaughter.

History has not been as kind, but Franz's gripping and well-researched work should go a long way to granting John Rankin his rightful esteem in America's collective memory. The Conductor highlights the importance of remembering those of us who accomplished great deeds while having the virtue not to leverage those deeds greedily.■

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