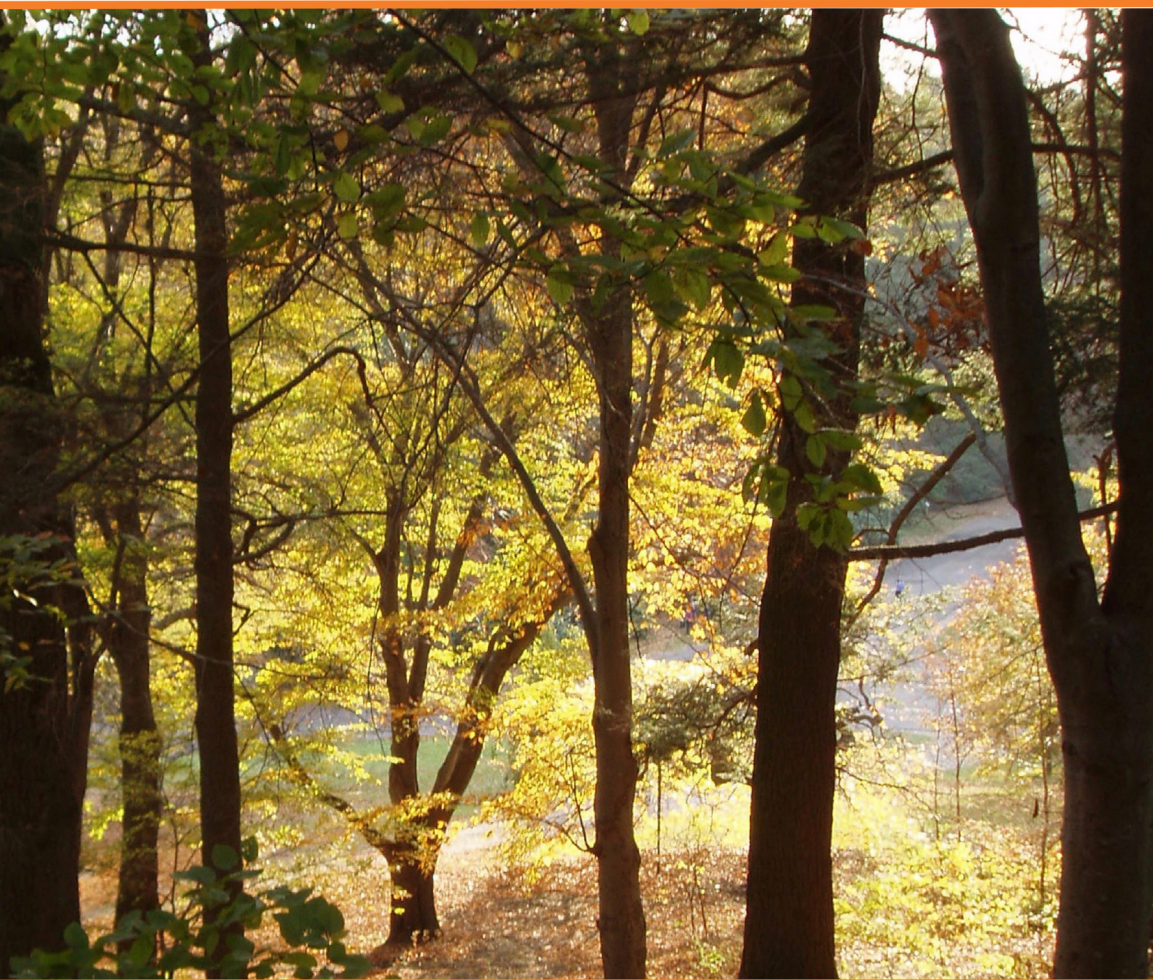


Fragile Foundations *and* Enduring Challenges

Essays on Democratic Politics and Governance



Max O. Stephenson Jr.

Fragile Foundations and Enduring Challenges

Other Books by Max O. Stephenson Jr.

RE: Reflections and Explorations Volume II: A Forum for Deliberative Dialogue. Blacksburg, Va.: Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance in Association with VT Publishing, 2017. Editor, with Lyusyena Kirakosyan.

RE: Reflections and Explorations: Essays on Public Policy and Governance. Blacksburg, Va.: Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance in Association with VT Publishing, 2015. Editor, with Lyusyena Kirakosyan.

Arts and Community Change: Exploring Cultural Development Policies, Practices and Dilemmas. Oxford, UK: Routledge Publishers, 2015. Editor, with Scott Tate.

Building Walls and Dissolving Borders: The Challenges of Alterity, Community and Securitizing Space. Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishers, 2013. Editor, with Laura Zanotti.

Peacebuilding through Community-Based NGOs: Paradoxes and Possibilities. Sterling, Va.: Kumarian Press, 2012. With Laura Zanotti.

Exploring Low-Income Housing Delivery Systems: Roles of Nonprofit Organizations in the United States. Seoul, South Korea: Korea Research Institute for Human Settlements, 2010. With Sang Ok Choi, Hye Seung Kim and Sung Je Jeon.

Fragile Foundations and Enduring Challenges

Essays on Democratic Politics and Governance

MAX O. STEPHENSON JR.



VIRGINIA TECH INSTITUTE for POLICY and GOVERNANCE

in ASSOCIATION with VT PUBLISHING

BLACKSBURG, VA

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First published 2019 by the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance in Association with VT Publishing.

Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance
201 West Roanoke St.
Blacksburg, VA 24060

VT Publishing
University Libraries at Virginia Tech
560 Drillfield Dr.
Blacksburg, VA 24061

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Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data (Prepared by The Donohue Group, Inc.)
Fragile Foundations and Enduring Challenges: Essays on Democratic Politics and Governance /
Max Stephenson Jr.

ISBN: 978-1-949373-09-7 (PDF)
ISBN: 978-1-949373-08-0 (epub)
ISBN: 978-1-949373-07-3 (paperback)

1. Political science. 2. Public policy (Law) 3. Public administration. 4. Education, Higher. 5. Community development. 6. Social Movements. 7. Democracy. 8. Neoliberalism. 9. Electronic books. I. Stephenson, Max O. II. Title: Fragile Foundations and Enduring Challenges. III. Title: Essays on Democratic Politics and Governance.

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Book cover images by Cathy Grimes and Meaghan Simonich.

*For Jessica
Whose Joy and Wonder Provided
An Enduring Example to All
Who Encountered Her*

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Acknowledgments

All authors owe a debt to those who support their work and I am surely no exception to that well-worn rule. I would like to thank my colleagues at the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance for supporting me as I fretted over the commentaries that appear in these pages as I wrote them. Nancy White, David Moore, Mary Beth Dunkenberger, Regina Naff, Andrew Morikawa and Heather Parrish have all listened and provided feedback as I have mused out loud about my thinking. Regina and Heather ensured the timely publication of the columns once I had written each. I am also indebted to Dean Jack Davis and Professor Anne Khademian for their essays that appear within this volume and for their long-time encouragement as I have produced these commentaries. Likewise, John Dooley, Chief Executive Officer of the Virginia Tech Foundation, has long supported me personally and this series more particularly. I thank him.

I want also to thank the PhD and master's students with whom I have worked and interacted during the years I have written these essays, as many of them have listened to nascent arguments and shared insights that have surely sharpened many of the efforts that appear here. It would be impossible to capture all I have learned from our interactions or to name all of them and list the ways I have benefited from each. Suffice it to say, my debt is surely incalculable.

Peter Potter and Robert Browder of Virginia Tech Libraries and Publishing have provided excellent technical support in all facets of design and production of this volume. I am also most grateful to Cathy Grimes and Meaghan Simonich for providing permission to use their photographs for the book's cover.

Finally, I wish to thank my colleague and Institute Senior Research Associate, Dr. Lyusyena Kirakosyan, for her help with organizing and producing this volume. I am extremely grateful for her invaluable assistance.

As always, I am responsible for any errors that may remain despite the support and assistance of this long list of individuals.

MOS Jr.

November 17, 2018

Salem, Virginia

Foreword by Jack Davis

Traversing the Landscape of Democratic Governance

Democracy requires faith. Like any belief system, democracy is an overarching term that encompasses multiple points of view, is frequently challenged and remains viable only with a committed priesthood. Fundamentalism is counter to its multifaced doctrine. It works best when it is ever present in dialog, legislation and jurisprudence. Every citizen of a democracy has oversight capabilities and responsibility, regardless of race, income, gender, ethnicity or religion. It is from this humble position, that Max Stephenson begins his timeless journey to inform and enlighten all of us.

Democracy must be built through open societies that share information. When there is information, there is enlightenment. When there is debate, there are solutions. When there is no sharing of power, no rule of law, no accountability, there is abuse, corruption, subjugation and indignation.¹

Governance reveals democracy. Governance is a human inevitability, but democracy is just one of its many belief systems or forms. As a human construct, it distinguishes itself by being a product of the many, not the one. As such, democracy is, by its nature, rarely clear or efficient. While others avoid or ignore the past, Stephenson keeps us in time and context. Pundits (and sometimes United States Presidents) are focused on 20-second sound bites, and few adopt the deliberate and time-consuming researched focus that Stephenson takes. He is without exaggeration, erudite, learned, scholarly, knowledgeable, well-educated, well-read, bookish, intellectual, academic, studious, and literary. His writing can sometimes be scary in its pessimism, but more often hopeful in its optimism, and always is astute. We wouldn't want anything less from a critical observer who is at times a silent alarm, and a light in the dark. He is a window into the future, through the now.

Fragile Foundations and Enduring Challenges: Essays on Democratic Politics and Governance is a trail guide through the difficult landscapes of democracy and governance. Drawing on analogy, metaphor and historical

precedent, Stephenson opens our eyes to future landscapes, complete with beauty and pitfalls. We are left to make our own decisions about how to proceed, as we should be. Democracy is a process, not a doctrine. Stephenson is a learned guide that helps us navigate our political world. In his 10 years of writing, he has given us current challenges in the context of history and projections of the future. Reading his essays is like sitting down with an erudite scholar, discussing the fundamentals (without the 'ism') of democracy, the politics of human relations, how we perceive natural phenomena, and the challenges we face in this current political incarnation. His four-section organization allows one to pick and choose one's interest areas, or to read in sequence the evolution of a complex political intrigue. Either way, secrets are revealed that help us understand the sheer folly, or the critical impacts, with which we are faced.

The reader is taken like a pilgrim on a single-focused march of faith. Enjoy the journey and contribute your findings to a form of governance that respects the sanctity of the individual in a collective process.

Jack Davis, FAIA LEED, A.P. Reynolds Metals Professor of Architecture and Former Dean, College of Architecture and Urban Studies, Virginia Tech

Notes

¹Atifete Jahjaga is a Kosovar politician and stateswoman who served as the third President of Kosovo. She was the first female President of the Republic of Kosovo, the first non-partisan candidate and the youngest female head of state to be elected to top office. Read more at:

https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/atifete_jahjaga_506715.

Introduction

“On the Brink of Everything”

The Genesis of this Book

More than a decade ago, I wrote my first commentary after being persuaded to begin doing so by the persistence of two colleagues. One kindly argued I had much to contribute to the national conversation concerning American policy and politics broadly understood, while the other suggested that writing a column on a more or less regular basis might enable me to connect the activities of the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance, which I serve as director, to broader trends in United States policy and politics. I at first addressed only the second of the two arguments my colleagues had offered, and I began to write a quarterly commentary, *Tidings*, concerning the larger questions raised or reflected in Institute projects. Associates in the Institute and beyond reacted warmly to those original efforts and I meanwhile continued to ponder the justification for what I was doing as a writer.

It occurred to me that the strongest reasons for writing about the nation's politics were related to my affiliation with a leading Land Grant university that takes its engagement and outreach mission seriously and that my professorial position gave me a platform to serve, however humbly, as a public intellectual. To my knowledge, University of California, Los Angeles historian Russell Jacoby was the first scholar to employ that term in 1987 in a provocative book that decried the decline of the class of writers he so labeled. Jacoby argued that those authors, now less in evidence, wrote for an educated, as opposed to a specialized, public and did so with clarity and verve. Meanwhile, as he put it, the major share of the nation's intellectuals had, “not disappeared, but something has altered in their composition. They have become more professional and insular; at the same time, they have lost command of the vernacular, which thinkers from Galileo to Freud had mastered.”¹

As I thought about what it would mean were I to take Jacoby's argument and concern seriously, I imagined that doing so would require drawing on relevant professional scholarship and learning in a fashion that might

traverse traditional disciplinary boundaries and be approachable for an audience of interested and knowledgeable individuals beyond the academy. More, I thought about what I wanted to do analytically with these essays. I certainly have had many models who were journalists, not to say intellectuals, considering politics for the public from whom to choose, including, Mark Danner of *The New York Review of Books*, Timothy Egan and Roger Cohen as well as Paul Krugman (the lone academic on this list) and Michelle Goldberg of *The New York Times* and Michael Gerson and Kathleen Parker of *The Washington Post*. These columnists routinely write thoughtfully, lucidly and trenchantly, but few of them, as distinguished as they are, self-consciously connect their columns concerning American politics to the requisites of democratic theory. That, and my penchant for wanting to draw connections between politics and literature, language and culture, might be my defining niche. Nonetheless, having drawn these distinctions and painted this picture of what appeared to me to be appropriate aims, I could not, and did not then know what seeking to realize them would mean in practice. That would come only with writing the essays. And so, in January 2010 I began writing a new and periodically published commentary series called *Soundings*. I chose that name in part to point to the two most common definitions of the term: “the action or process of measuring the depth of the sea or other body of water; information or evidence ascertained as a preliminary step before deciding on a course of action” that addressed current concerns in American politics and policy-making and sought to tie those to long-term issues linked to self-governance and democracy.² In a sense, I sought to connect the two most used meanings of the word together in my own way. From January 2012 until January 2015, I wrote weekly *Soundings* commentaries. Starting in January 2015 and to date, I have published *Soundings* essays on a bi-weekly basis.

Taken together, these commentaries constitute an oeuvre all their own. Nevertheless, when, recently, a colleague referred to me as a “prolific” writer, I found myself puzzled by that descriptor as I have never regarded myself in such terms. Rather, I have fallen into writing as vocation and that has occurred while producing these commentaries. Parker Palmer, the renowned educator and author, recently wrote a book looking back over his eventful life as he entered his eighth decade.³ One chapter of that volume concerned how he came to be an author and his discussion of that topic struck me because in it, he argued that writing had for him taken the character of a vocation and was not simply a job or a part of other

professional responsibilities. That is, writing became and remained a compulsion for him, undertaken not to satisfy someone else's expectations, but instead to help him work on the knotty problems he continuously found himself encountering and about which he persistently wanted to know more. Here is how he put this point:

Novices are often advised, 'write about what you know.' I wouldn't call that bad counsel, but I'd extend it a bit: 'Write about what you want to know because it intrigues and puzzles you.' That's the hunger that keeps me engaged with a craft that I find endlessly challenging and of which sportswriter Red Smith said, 'There's nothing at all to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein.'⁴

Just so for me. I have found writing these commentaries has helped me address nagging concerns about the relationship between human nature and democratic possibility, between self-governance and humankind's boundless capacities for avarice, cruelty and quest for power, and between humanity's equally powerful potential for good and just action and its frequent embrace of a will to power and of evil. All of these questions are as old as humankind and equally enduring in their centrality and significance. As John Steinbeck wrote in his novel, *East of Eden*:

A child may ask, 'What is the world's story about?' And a grown man or woman may wonder, 'What way will the world go? How does it end and, while we're at it, what's the story about?' I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one, that has frightened and inspired us, so that we live in a Pearl White serial of continuing thought and wonder. Humans are caught—in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too—in a net of good and evil. I think this is the only story we have and that it occurs on all levels of feeling and intelligence.⁵

Writing these essays required that I consider carefully these more profound concerns to seek to discern how current political or policy turns reflected deeper currents in human history. In so doing, I have often uncovered additional issues and still thornier paradoxes whose character demanded exploration. These challenges have at once been

stimulating and puzzling and when addressed, at least for that moment, as Palmer observed, often difficult to fathom,

I'm often surprised by what I discover, and by the sense that it has been sitting there waiting for me to find it. This explains why, time after time, when someone cites a few lines from one of my books, I'll ask myself, 'Did I really write that?' I barely recognize it as my own thought because, in one sense, it isn't. It's an insight I stumbled across on my way to who-knows-where.⁶

If writing is a vocation for me—and producing these essays has brought that fact home—it surely should be considered a part of the larger calling that drew me to university life in the first instance. I have always viewed the academy as a vocation, and it is that aspiration that drew me to the scholarly life originally. I was, as George Steiner hauntingly observed of his own experience, "... lucky in my teachers. They left me persuaded that, at its best, the relation of teacher to student is an enacted allegory of disinterested love."⁷ In the spirit of writing as vocation nested in an overarching call to be a scholar, I have come to see the essays that comprise this volume as a privilege that has allowed me to serve a broader community that shares my devotion to, and fascination with, freedom and self-governance, and to do so, as Steiner might say, as an "enacted allegory of disinterested love."

I borrowed the title of this essay from Palmer's recent book and he, in turn, appropriated it from the opening line of a poignant column offered in 2015 by Courtney Martin that treated the awe with which her 16-month-old daughter approached the world:

My daughter is on the brink of everything. ... The mundane becomes miraculous through the eyes of my 16-month-old daughter. She's rarely disappointed, and when she is, she simply moves on to the next miracle waiting in a kitchen drawer or nestled in the soil in the garden beds. As she marvels, I'm marveling anew.⁸

I have often enjoyed just such a sense of discovery and awe in writing these essays, even when they have treated dispiriting trends and difficult turns for our nation's politics and governance. Each commentary has given me the opportunity to consider possibilities, look afresh at abiding and significant issues and paradoxes linked to a free people's ongoing attempt to govern itself and to seek to discern lessons that can illuminate paths forward. In this

sense, writing these essays has surely kept me “on the brink of everything” for more than a decade, and if it has been a sometimes-frustrating and wild ride reminiscent of Mr. Toad in *The Wind and the Willows*, it has nonetheless always been a bracing and marvelous one, too.⁹

The Structure, Organization and Major Themes of this Volume

I have organized this book chronologically according to the dates of the pieces that appear here and along what I have interpreted as a growing crisis in American governance. The four sections describe an expanding set of challenges for our regime and the democratic way of life of its people. Our nation today is at a crossroads, having narrowly elected a demagogue as its president in 2016, and may soon also endure another Constitutional crisis as a result, depending on the outcome of multiple investigations into the current chief executive’s past personal conduct and business dealings. In any case, the United States has turned inward during the current presidency and is now attacking the international community its leaders had previously labored endlessly to help produce during the decades following World War II. The country’s chief executive is now also daily assailing the idea of human and civil rights, which the American nation was founded to symbolize and to preserve. Taken together, the four parts of this book trace my deepening alarm concerning this trajectory and its implications for freedom in our own and other countries.

Apart from organizing the selections in this way, these commentaries also reflect a number of enduring topics and questions and their consequences. These concerns are hardy perennials and are in no sense “solvable.” Rather, each presents itself anew repeatedly and must be addressed in the context in which it arises.

- Because democracy ultimately trusts individuals to govern themselves and to guarantee the freedom of all within their political communities as they do, this form of governance must wrestle continuously with the fact that human beings can be mobilized around hate and fear and with the fact that would-be elected leaders and autocrats alike will be tempted persistently to use such claims to gain power. More precisely, humankind has perhaps an evolution-created difficulty dealing with difference and heterogeneity, especially as this factor relates to ensuring common rights for all, irrespective of their specific

characteristics. This is to provide an example of how human nature plays roles in the character and possibility of democratic self-governance. This concern is an abiding question or tension that suffuses all of the essays presented in this book.

- If human nature plays a role in shaping the possibility of self-governance, ideologies both construct and reflect community ways of knowing. In the case of the United States, a series of historical events in the 1960s and early 1970s, including deep divisions in the population arising from the Vietnam War, the Watergate crisis and a series of oil shocks that created unprecedented economic conditions, convinced a majority of Americans that self-governance was the architect of those difficulties and that they should adopt neo-liberalism as its antidote. Advocates of that public philosophy, including Ronald Reagan, its most persuasive popularizer in the United States, promised that markets could govern and would bring prosperity and argued repeatedly that self-governance was a problem to be overcome and set-aside and not a privilege necessary to secure and ensure individual freedom. Roiled by globalization and concerns arising from the events listed just above, millions of Americans agreed, and this way of thinking soon came to dominate the national discourse, policy-making and culture as well. The results have been catastrophic overall by widening and deepening social and economic inequality strongly, but quite profitable for capital owners who have been the principal beneficiaries of this turn. Both of the nation's political parties have adopted this public philosophy, but the Republican Party especially has embraced an ever more virulent version of it. Few of those in the Party today can or do espouse anything other than a doctrinaire hatred of democratic institutions.
- Other institution-level trends also appear as significant in these pages. Those developments include massive shifts in how citizens stay in touch with the world that have accompanied the growth of the internet and an accompanying explosive growth in mass communication modalities. Individuals can now obtain only such information as accords with their prejudices or viewpoints and ignore all else. Our nation's political parties and interests have been quick to exploit this turn to mobilize around extremist claims and these have sharply diminished elected leader's capacities and willingness to deal with officials with differing views with marked negative consequences for our country's capacity for governance.

- The United States has likewise witnessed major cultural changes as these shifts in communications have taken place, including a decline in the number of individuals participating actively in politics and civil society institutions and reading, who instead seem to favor playing video games and surfing websites and checking social media platforms, garnering impressions from those visited without according any deep and sustained attention. These shifts have resulted in sharp declines in average citizen attention spans and willingness to engage in democratic deliberation.
- Finally, all of these trends have led to unprecedented partisan polarization and to election of a president fond of demanding absolute allegiance to his claims on the part of his supporters, however false, far-fetched or self-serving those may be. This climate has created extraordinary tensions in our society and for our regime's institutions. These essays treat its many permutations, including particularly for the civil and human rights of the nation's residents.

John Steinbeck kept a journal as he was writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel now regarded as a masterpiece of American literature and for which he received the Pulitzer prize in 1940. He often expressed his self-doubt about his project in that diary, but also argued that he had to move forward with the book anyway:

I only hope it is some good. I have very grave doubts sometimes. I don't want this to seem hurried. It must be just as slow and measured as the rest, but I am sure of one thing—it isn't the great book I had hoped it would be. It's just a run-of-the-mill book. And the awful thing is that it is absolutely the best I can do. Now to work on it.¹⁰

I have often felt the same way as I was writing the commentaries in this volume. That is, I offer them in the spirit of Steinbeck's observation: They were the best I could do. I invite the reader to join me in the sustained and impassioned intellectual adventure that spawned them.

Notes

¹ Jacoby, Russell. 1987, 2000. "Introduction to the 2000 Edition," *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. New York, NY: Basic Books, p. XV.

- ² “Sounding,” Google On-Line Dictionary. Available at: <https://www.google.com/search?q=Soundings&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-1>.
- ³ Palmer, Parker. 2018. *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity and Getting Old*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- ⁴ Palmer, *On the Brink of Everything*, pp. 91-92.
- ⁵ Steinbeck, John. 1952, 2002. *East of Eden*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, p. 411.
- ⁶ Palmer, *On the Brink of Everything*, pp.101-102.
- ⁷ Steiner, George. 1997. *Errata: An Examined Life*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 136.
- ⁸ Martin, Courtney. 2015. “Reuniting with Awe,” *On Being*, March 6. Available at: <https://onbeing.org/blog/reuniting-with-awe/>.
- ⁹ Grahame, Kenneth. 1908, 2017. *The Wind in the Willows: An Illustrated Classic*. New York: Simon and Schuster-Canterbury Classics.
- ¹⁰ Steinbeck, John. 1990. *Working Days: The Journals of the Grapes of Wrath*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, p.90.

SECTION I
EARLY WARNING SIGNS
(2010-2013)

1 Democratic Expectations: A Nation of Toddlers?

I listened to an interview today with National Public Radio's Senior Political Editor on that network's Sunday Morning version of *Weekend Edition* and was more than a little dumbstruck. The central theme of the questions and answers was that President Obama has yet to accomplish much in his tenure. The editor noted the health care bill has not yet passed and the President's foreign policy initiatives have not yet transformed Iran, North Korea or China. And, he has not ended the conflicts into which his predecessor entered the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, unemployment remains high and economic uncertainty a staple for all Americans. For these reasons, the editor opined, Obama remains more a tantalizing possibility as a leader rather than a leader.

It struck me while listening that such analysis both presupposes an extraordinary capacity for the office of the presidency and its incumbent to affect events that is essentially juvenile in its expectations while also contributing to an increasing American propensity to consider all matters politic without examining their context. It also assigns a bar to what constitutes effective leadership, in a polity designed to hobble it, at an extraordinary level. President Obama, it seems, should not only have stopped the worst hemorrhaging of the nation's economy in decades, he should also have created millions of jobs pronto and while he was at it through sheer force of will or magic capacity somehow shifted not only American foreign policy, but also that of all regimes whose policies we perceive as pernicious or antithetical to our own. That the President sought aggressive action to address the economic situation and did work with leaders from all sectors to stop a possible economic calamity was set aside by this editor since the economy has not already bounced back to offer millions of jobs.

I know of few economists or serious analysts who believe the President or government acting alone can or could secure that result in any case. But it is doubtless true that the recovery is nascent rather than robust. How much responsibility can appropriately be assigned a President who has served one year for that situation? Similarly, we are on the cusp of securing a major health care reform of the sort sought by various administrations regardless of partisanship since 1911, but since it has not yet passed, somehow this

editor implied, the President is lacking. No one else has come so close to such change (whether one admires what is afoot or not), but since it has not already passed, it is somehow to be set aside. One might undertake a similar analysis of the administration's efforts to avert economic catastrophe. That matters have not already been set right and with full employment, is somehow an issue for the President and one can just imagine wagging one's finger and signaling tsk, tsk!

It does not seem to occur to the general populace, or to those "analysts" of politics reporting on the government's efforts, that it might be appropriate to consider what might constitute a reasonable standard of expectations for so complex a set of dilemmas as now besets American government (whoever is in charge). Instead of such self-conscious and prudential deliberation, however, because we would wish it so collectively and we are empowered by our franchise to determine who "wins" and who does not, we set whatever standard we like and throw whatever tantrums we wish when those to whom we turn cannot magically make our challenges go away as fast as we might desire. We teach toddlers that maturation and a knowledge of life's complexities demands a more leavened and patient view and that we cannot typically have all we wish when we might want it. Can we instill a similar ethic or prudential reasonableness in our citizenry and its pundit class? Successful democratic governance may well depend upon it.

(Originally published January 17, 2010)

2 Coping with Anguish in America

Peter Trachtenberg's *The Book of Calamities: Five Questions about Suffering and its Meaning*, published in 2008, recently won a Phi Beta Kappa award for excellence in nonfiction.¹ The book makes for a sometimes searing, often sobering and always absorbing read. It is comprised of an interwoven series of vignettes treating elemental questions about suffering. In the chapter concerned with the question of what affliction may mean for its bearers, Trachtenberg visits a retreat held for Vietnam War veterans who recount the stories of pain from that conflict that still dominate their lives. The witnessing session of this group at once deeply moved and repelled Trachtenberg and ultimately provided a signal insight into the American collective conscience concerning the role and meaning of suffering.

As with soldiers in previous wars, some witnessed or participated in horrors of unspeakable cruelty that they cannot articulate to this day. My own uncle, for example, who served as a Marine tank commander at Guadalcanal and other bloody battles of World War II's Pacific theatre, never spoke of what he had witnessed and undergone. Those Vietnam Vets at the gathering could share what they underwent or visited on others, but were unable nonetheless to cope effectively with those realities. Many, Trachtenberg reports, deeply resent the nation that sent them to war and then collectively spat (as they see matters) on their sacrifice. Many have seen their marriages fail, their children grow to adulthood deeply troubled and many of the veterans continue to be afflicted by alcoholism, drug addiction or mental health challenges.

Trachtenberg recounts how touched he was to learn how difficult these men's lives had been since their military service. Many had never again held steady jobs, most suffered flashbacks of their experiences that prevented sleep and haunted their dreams and others simply had difficulty coping with daily life. And yet, the author wondered aloud if a strong share of those gathered were making a place in the world by "one upping" their peers in a melancholy game of who "has it worse" at events such as the retreat. This concern arose when Trachtenberg witnessed the reaction the vets evidenced to the program-concluding comments of a Vietnamese dharma, a man revered by the group as a person of peace and wisdom who was invited to listen to all of the stories shared at the retreat and offer wrap-

up reflections. The priest observed that these men (for they were all men) needed now to give up their pain and go out in the world to assist others with their suffering. Rather than ponder the implications of this very Buddhist response to their shared experiences, the majority of the veterans believed the minister had “sold them out” and dismissed their invitee’s counsel.

Trachtenberg explained this reaction as a collective fear that it is only very public sharing of their suffering that can provide any social standing and legitimacy for these veterans. Were it not for this badge of honor, the only outward manifestation of being wounded in war, Trachtenberg argues, these men would be completely written off as failures in American society and that final twist of fate they simply could not bear. To say this is troubling is to understate the matter. What it suggests is that this sub-population clings to its suffering because society is simply too reluctant otherwise to legitimate publicly its pain. In this case, that anguish was imposed by American society itself, but the notion may be extended. Americans expect mourners to grieve and suffer in private. Indeed, Americans expect people to return to work and their daily routines with little public evidence of their pain. In fact, people become impatient with those who continue mourning or suffering, as though somehow they should get over it and get on with life. Those who endure the tragic long-term illness or incapacitation of a family member elicit sympathy, but the episode must have a finite end, or be discussed only infrequently, lest the bearer be construed as “always a downer,” or worse.

The paradox of the veterans’ situation points to a cruelty of American values: We collectively do not wish to confront suffering and prefer, indeed demand, that those bearing it do so in private to the maximum extent feasible, perhaps especially when that misery arose directly from our collective choices. These confused and broken vets were and are caught in a web of their own nation’s making: We will not acknowledge their pain and sorrow if it is not relentlessly placed before us and even then, we will do so only reluctantly. But if these men were not to wear that anguish as a symbol, we would quickly count them failures and move on. A very odd disposition this: to rob the suffering of their dignity unless they wear that grief daily as so much ignominy. This is surely a nation built on suffering and yet, one that cannot find its way to honor those tormented in its midst. That irony is both distressing and profound, and the costs to both those in pain and to the nation of which they are a part cannot be counted.

(Originally published February 7, 2010)

Notes

- ¹ Trachtenberg, Peter, 2008. *The Book of Calamities: Five Questions about Suffering and its Meaning*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.

3 Evan Bayh had it Right

In the normal course of events Senator Bayh's decision last month not to seek almost certain reelection to his Indiana post is now old news, "discount rack" material. But the reasons the Senator advanced for his choice are enduringly significant. Indeed, one of those motivations, offered in a commentary in *The New York Times* on February 21, 2010, served as something of a foundation for the Senator's other concerns.¹ Overall, Bayh pointed to institutional, individual, and for want of a better word, democratic reasons for his decision, but the foundation of all of these is a deterioration in willingness among lawmakers to treat differing views concerning the public weal with anything other than contempt. Many on both sides of the aisle, in both the House and Senate, treat colleagues holding perspectives other than their own as enemies to be defeated rather than fellow lawmakers who happen to have different views concerning public policy issues.

The Senator focused on the role of personal relationships as a palliative to this poisonous gridlock now characterizing Congress. Bayh lamented the fact that so many senators no longer can think beyond tactical and immediate political advantage as they consider all (literally) things, including their personal relationships with their colleagues. It now seems naïve, he argued, to talk about how senators in the past could disagree vehemently in debate and then go to an opponent's home for dinner. In short, senators in the past recognized the legitimacy of alternate points of view and could separate debate over different conceptions of the public good from how they regarded their fellow legislators. Yet, as Bayh pointed out, and he is hardly alone in his view, this is increasingly not the case. Instead, senators routinely belittle one another for perceived partisan or ideological advantage and interact only sparingly with colleagues who do not share their point-of-view.

Given an already existing atmosphere of hyper-partisanship, it is difficult to establish trust if one has little or no opportunity to interact with one's opponents, except to seek to portray them in ways resulting in perceived partisan advantage. Indeed, that orientation can corrode any real possibility of developing capacity to bridge differences, a necessity in a heterogeneous nation. And far from being trivial, personal relationships in Congress (and indeed in organizations of all sorts) are the basis on which institutional

action and possibility are constructed. Bayh remarked that it is exceedingly difficult to work with another senator when you believe he or she will depart their conference with you and head to the studio to record an attack ad against your reelection or to a fundraiser at which you and your beliefs will be held up to ridicule or worse.

It is difficult to imagine in such circumstances how one could trust enough even to risk developing a relationship deeper than the animus built on ideological rhetoric. And to the extent this description is accurate, it results in a siloed congressional institution whose members are arrayed against one another as if armed enemies, speaking and listening principally to fellow travelers, while posturing to their specific constituencies—which are most readily mobilized by high octane rhetoric disparaging “the other” with whom they disagree. In brief, what works to secure democratic mobilization of bias works against effective institutional action, which in turn depends on personal relationships and a willingness to accept the possibility of diverse views of the public good.

Bayh was right. Personal relationships are the keystone to change in our current governance situation. Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine what incentives can be employed actually to improve this corrosive scenario absent a change in the public attitudes to which they ultimately are attached.

(Originally published March 14, 2010)

Notes

¹ Bayh, E. 2010. “Why I’m Leaving the Senate,” *The New York Times*, February 20. Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/21/opinion/21bayh.html>

4 Fear on the Border

Professor Laura Zanotti, of Virginia Tech Department of Political Science, and I recently edited a book for Routledge Publishers entitled *Building Walls and Dissolving Borders: The Challenges of Alterity, Community and Securitizing Space*.¹ The volume includes articles addressing the Israeli Seam Wall, the Bamboo Walls of Taiwan, the United States' border wall with Mexico and the Berlin Wall. Our work on these chapters has set me thinking particularly about how the new United States-Mexico wall construction compares with some of its earlier counterparts. "Our wall," while similar to its predecessors in many ways, nevertheless fits our national character and identity badly and is unlikely to accomplish its intended purposes in any case. That said, it will surely have unintended implications that are not likely to serve the nation well.

The Mexico border wall has been justified in two primary ways. First, its proponents argue it will prevent "illegals" from crossing the border to take employment, rightly the purview of American citizens in the United States. Secondly, its advocates contend it will help to slow the supply of illegal drugs entering the nation. The first reason is often buttressed by claims that immigrants impose costs on taxpayers by enrolling their children in local schools and using publicly supported health, transport and other services. The second claim is often defended in turn by an accounting of the human and financial costs of Americans' addiction to dangerous drugs. Indeed, extreme variants of these concerns have spawned the vigilante-like Minuteman border protection project, whose members make no secret of their antipathy to these alien "others" in ways that often sound perilously like nativist racism.

Critics of the wall, meanwhile, point out that immigrants do not tend to take posts Americans would otherwise occupy. Instead, they undertake work in low paying positions such as motel maids, restaurant kitchen workers, housekeepers and janitors and agricultural field hands. Wall skeptics suggest such employment is hard and often entails long hours and, in any case, is not often sought by U.S. citizens. They also argue these individuals impose few costs on the nation's taxpayers, not least because they are afraid to become too well known for fear of deportation.

Justifications and critiques notwithstanding, it seems clear neither side addresses why this wall, which surely cannot prevent those who are determined from illegal entry or bar narcotics in the face of continuing demand, is being constructed in the first instance, complete with a controversial radar and infrared motion-sensing system in a so-called no man's land along the border. Nor does the current debate explain the stark contrast of the current effort with previous united American support for two Presidents who famously opposed separational barriers. John Kennedy declared "we are all Berliners now" as the nation launched a perilous airlift to ensure the freedom of West Berlin. Ronald Reagan stood before the Berlin Wall and called on the Soviet Union's leader "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" How is it that less than 23 years after Reagan made that famous speech and despite the justifiable pride Americans take in the Berlin airlift, America is building a border wall of its own to keep out the "other"? Americans sacrificed to secure West Berliners their freedom, they engaged in a protracted Cold War to overcome Soviet tyranny and now, ironically, they are building their own wall on a rationale virtually identical to that which sustained the walls they so long combated.

The Mexico Wall does not connote the freedom those two presidents embraced. It does not beckon to those who would build a nation in the tradition of so many mass migrations to America in the past. Instead, it seeks to prevent entry and to stop possibilities. It is predicated on an assumption that barriers matter. Nonetheless, scholars who have studied walls around the world suggest such barricades can do little to change social conditions or to prevent the "leakage" of ideas and meanings across them. The U.S. Border Wall cannot provide more economic opportunities for Mexicans in their native country, and it surely can do nothing to affect American demand for illegal drugs. A change in such claims must come from a shift in the attitudes and habits of those consuming them. Nevertheless, paradoxically, the Mexico Wall runs the risk of becoming a symbol, an iconic indicator, of a free nation's fear. It can play a primary and obvious role in the slow enervation of the idea of the United States as a symbol of free aspiration in favor of one that seeks to clamp down and control "others" in its midst. It can, in short, begin to corrode the very social sinews that bind the nation and on which John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan could each implicitly rely as they called on other peoples to permit and pursue freedom. However construed, this seems a very high price to pay for a wall that cannot secure the policy aims assigned to it.

(Originally published March 20, 2010)

Notes

- ¹ Stephenson, Max Jr. and Laura Zanotti. 2013. *Building Walls and Dissolving Borders: The Challenges of Alterity, Community, and Securitizing Space*. New York, NY: Routledge.

5 A Tale of Two Interpretations

John Ydstie, the economics correspondent for National Public Radio, reported this morning on that network's *Morning Edition* news program, that a recent Pew Charitable Trusts poll had revealed that only 30 percent of Americans are aware that the now widely unpopular Troubled Assets Recovery Program (TARP) was signed and supported by Present George W. Bush and not President Obama, to whom it is nonetheless just as broadly attributed.¹ Ydstie went on to observe that the large numbers of Americans concerned about TARP do not realize that the major banks assisted by that "bailout" have now repaid their debt with interest and that AIG (American International Group, Inc.) and the two major automakers that received support from the initiative (Chrysler and General Motors) increasingly look positioned to do so as well, with the result that taxpayers may yet break even or perhaps make money on their emergency investment.

More deeply, and apart from this factual reality, Ydstie noted that those objecting to TARP focus on the noxious behavior of certain bank executives and on the belief that those institutions had "plenty of money" and had "made their own beds," instead of asking whether the step, distasteful or not, had actually saved a deeply imperiled economy from even deeper distress (the concern that surely animated the President and policy-makers). How can this be? Do those so vehemently arguing TARP was a waste of money really wish that President Bush, and later President Obama, and the Congress had played roulette on the question of what might happen if several of those very large financial institutions had been allowed to fail? In any case, that point is empirically moot since the national government looks set to have made a good, if initially risky, decision even as its actions steadied the perilous state of the U.S. and global economy. So, why are so many voters so angry and so uninformed about what arguably was a prudent choice that has turned out better than hoped?

Robert Reich, on October 25, argues in his blog in effect that this paradox has to do with deeply cynical partisan mobilization politics.² I argue it may also be the product of what political scientists have called parallel processing, regardless of how one views the motivations of those involved. Even though President Bush was responsible for the TARP, many of his party's current leaders have argued that it, and the Obama fiscal stimulus

package that followed it, were a “waste of money” since the nation’s unemployment rate still hovers above 9 percent. They have sought to focus public attention on the nation’s deficit and argue that it deserves consideration now, and that reality demands not more government economic engagement, but less. Again, whether that argument makes empirical or fiscal sense is debatable, but whatever its policy merits it certainly allows voters to fix political blame for the high unemployment rate on the current administration, even as it appeals to an abiding concern about the appropriate role of government in the United States political economy and to fears of unduly burdening future generations with unpaid debt.

That is, these leaders are successfully drawing many voters’ attention to spending (one parallel stream of meaning) and not who did what or why to address what has been dubbed the nation’s financial meltdown, or indeed what the consequences of those choices have been (another parallel stream of sensemaking). Reich implies Republican leaders are doing so on the cynical view that few will notice they are denying their own party’s record. Whether their stance is cynical or genuinely believed, public opinion polls do affirm that a large majority of Americans know little about the facts of the economic situation the nation has faced and is confronting, and that millions are responding to GOP calls to focus instead on near-term government spending and to assign blame for ongoing conditions to the Obama administration on that basis. The strategy appears to be working electorally. Republican Party leaders have focused many voters’ attention away from the broader economic danger that the nation continues to confront and placed it increasingly instead on that hoary chestnut of partisan conflict: what role the government should play in the nation’s political economy. In this scenario of contested ways of making sense of an ongoing economic situation amidst widespread ignorance of key facts, the conversation becomes one of who to blame for government spending rather than a dialogue about whether an economic disaster was successfully forestalled by prudent, even far-sighted, public action by leaders of both political parties, and what steps should be taken next.

Whether as a partisan one wishes to applaud the apparent success of this electoral tactic as a clever mobilization strategy or lament it as a misleading fraud, it raises once more, and clearly, the issue of the role that mediated meaning is playing in United States politics and electoral choices. A substantial majority of Americans are patently uninformed about the decisions their leaders have made and why, and are therefore professing a

deep anger and concern that is at best, as a factual matter, misplaced. At worst, this collective lack of understanding and awareness allows those who would seek power, whatever their partisanship, to use that ignorance for their own purposes. Whatever one's partisan affiliation, a public so deeply uninformed cannot be good for the nation's long-term democratic health.

(Originally published October 26, 2010)

Notes

¹ Ydstie, John. 2010. Democrats struggle to make case on Economy. National Public Radio, *Morning Edition*, October 26. Available at:

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130814013>.

² Reich, Robert. 2010. "After the Midterms: Why Democrats Move to Center, and Republicans Don't." Robert Reich (website), October 25. Available at:

<http://robertreich.org/post/1398873669>.

6 Peacebuilding as Disciplined Imagination and Maturity

In a recent commentary, Milet Mendoza of the Philippines, who is currently serving as a Women Peacemaker at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego, and who was kidnapped and held captive at gunpoint for two months by the guerrilla group Abu Sayyaf in her home nation in 2008, said:

As they were taping my mouth shut, I said what I thought were going to be my last words: 'I just want you to know that my respect for the Muslim people has not diminished because many of them opened their homes to me, adopted me as their sister, as their daughter, as one of them. And because of that I became a better Christian.' As a humanitarian and a peace worker, I feel strongly that it is not about 'I and me,' but 'we and us.' My story is part of a bigger story. I share this story because I hope people see the importance of the context, of why people turned out to be like this. I was sure that if I were born in that side of the world, I could be one of them. ... When you enter a community that has been traumatized and disintegrated, what is important at the end of the day is that you uplift the human dignity of people. Human security is not just where people are now but the hope and the dream that is crystallized when they see their own potential. You draw out the best in people by providing them opportunities to take the primary role in making positive changes.¹

These are rare insights plainly stated. They suggest that those who would practice peacebuilding or international development, or who seek change in others' lives in this country for that matter, should do so from a position of sincere humility and empathy for those being served. That this is always difficult, and sometimes profoundly so, is obvious from the choices Mendoza had to make in the horrific circumstances she confronted.

Mendoza's decisions suggest an individual willing to forgive rather than seek vengeance or retribution, even when perhaps justified, in the name of the possibility of building a greater community. It is interesting to imagine what might have transpired if the majority of America's population and

elected leaders had reacted with such prudence, probity and reflection following the September 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. Or, if today, such critical and empathetic distancing characterized our own nation's political discourse, which instead is literally, lately, replete with clarion calls to punish someone, anyone really, for the nations' continuing economic turmoil.

Yet, no such reflective mental and emotional toughness or humility characterized our public dialogue in 2001, and today's full-throated cry for scapegoats and targets of blame for our economic travail hardly gives reason for hope that such a discerning conversation will emerge soon. In truth, a democratic community confronting difficult challenges may require many like Mendoza, but our nation's experience in recent years suggests they will nonetheless be in too short supply in leadership roles when social choices are made. The bedeviling problem for friends of self-governance and supporters of peacebuilding is how to secure leaders and citizens with the capabilities necessary to secure deliberation and a devotion to the commons. Today's political climate provides little hope this critical concern will receive attention from elected leaders anytime soon. Meanwhile, the search for scapegoats and false panaceas will continue. The nagging question for America as it was for Mendoza, remains: What are the costs of a continuing collective lack of emotional discipline and truncated empathetic imagination?

(Originally published October 25, 2010)

Notes

¹ Mendoza, Milet. 2010. "Peacebuilding: The Art of Human Appreciation," on Peace X Peace (website), October 25. Available at: <http://www.peacexpeace.org/2010/10/peacebuilding-the-art-of-human-appreciation/>.

7 Democracy at Work? The Age-Old Challenge of ‘Local’ Majoritarianism

Recent days have seen a controversy erupt in a nearby small public school district, Giles County Public Schools, here in western Virginia. On December 8, 2010, a staff attorney from the Freedom from Religion Foundation of Madison, Wisconsin, a group that advocates for the separation of church and state, wrote the Giles County Superintendent of Schools asking that a public display of the Ten Commandments be removed from a County school on grounds that long-established Constitutional law prohibits public support and display of sectarian tracts.¹ In his letter, the Foundation’s attorney cited numerous court decisions on the topic. In a written response on December 17, the superintendent said the offending exhibit would be removed following the holiday break and so it was. But that was not the end of the matter. A group of residents was outraged at the district administrator’s action and those concerned individuals attended the next scheduled County School Board meeting and demanded the return of the framed Decalogue. The crowd promptly received its wish when every Board member voted to restore the Commandments to their place in the County’s schools.

I do not wish here to debate the normative or legal merits of either position, but instead accept for the sake of argument, as the vast majority of legal scholars do, the national precedent as established in favor of removal of the display. Rather, I find two things interesting about this episode. Both remind observers of key characteristics and potential dangers of democratic action. First, this community event holds lessons about public leadership and its role in securing the possibility of community deliberation. Second, it reminds us of the power—and sometimes troublingly errant power—of unfettered majoritarianism as an ever-present potential Achilles heel of democracy. Freedom, at least in a diverse society, requires transparent and deliberative processes of decision-making if such decisions are to be popularly legitimated.

Concerning the first point, the leaders of a relatively poor school system have elected to risk bearing the costs of a major lawsuit (perhaps a \$100,000 or more liability) they look likely to lose rather than seek to explain to aggrieved citizens the realities of the situation they confront. That is, no member of the School Board saw fit to ask protesting citizens to consider

the potential costs of a lawsuit or the likelihood of victory against the well-established weight of legal precedent were the display to be reinstated and a suit to follow. Instead, a group of citizens “had its way” by demanding in a public meeting en masse that leaders take what was at least arguably an imprudent course with potential detrimental consequences for the district’s students. All things being equal, and barring a sudden desire for a tax increase (also unpopular with those same citizens), those students will likely bear directly the costs of a lawsuit. And this cost would be borne not on the basis of a certainty that this display actually played a role in the inculcation of the values it represents, but on grounds that its removal was symbolically outrageous to their parents and other district residents.

Whether that claim might be worth the real costs of a lost court battle was not raised as a concern for consideration or debated or even pressed by County School leaders, who were quick instead to back the aggressively vocally aggrieved. Indeed, the Board chair publicly vowed to take the matter to court if need be. While the Board might well have decided not to buck a perceived majority following careful consideration of these issues, it seems safe to say its members did not encourage thoughtful reflection of the implications of the emotional outrage protesting citizens were feeling. Public leaders did not ask those attending to stop and reflect on the course they were advancing; they did not encourage a cooler deliberation. And, while it seems likely, it was not established that those protesting represented the views of the County’s broader citizenry.

The dangers implicit in simple majority rule are well known and include both imprudent and unjust action. Public leaders who wish to avoid majority tyranny have long been expected to counsel deliberate action and to take steps to allow cooler heads to prevail. Nothing like that role emerged in this episode. The majority and its unexamined anger prevailed despite arguments by the Board’s attorney and its superintendent that this represented an imprudent course of action. Whether that perceived “victory” turns out to be worth its cost in the longer run remains to be seen. In any case, potential opportunity costs were never considered in the public dialogue at the relevant Board meeting and a possibly important democratic deliberative moment never emerged.

This scenario also reveals another challenge for democracy: left to their own devices and unchallenged, and with power to impose costs, citizens will often make choices on the basis of emotions, whether or not those preserve others’ rights. History is literally littered with examples of this tendency

and our Founders' rightly feared majority tyranny as the possible undoing of freedom itself. In a small way, perhaps, this case illustrates the dangers of such unreflective action. A group, upset by a perceived "outsider's" request, may end up imposing potentially significant costs on its own children on the basis of a symbolic claim. And more, this action was taken not amidst a weighing of the implications of such a choice, but instead amid anger and calls for retribution. History teaches the results of such choice-making are often lamentable and always problematic. This episode now unfolding in a thinly populated county in western Virginia suggests an age-old lesson: responsible freedom cannot be preserved without deliberative leadership and a majority willing to weigh evidence prudently and to consider conflicting claims and values.

(Originally published January 1, 2011)

Notes

¹ Freedom from Religion Foundation. 2011. "FFRF sues Virginia school over Ten Commandments," Freedom from Religion Foundation website. Available at: <https://ffrf.org/component/k2/item/2809-ffrf-sues-virginia-school-over-ten-commandments>.

8 Rhetoric has Consequences

Newly installed Speaker of the House of Representatives John Boehner has decided to begin his tenure and the period of a new GOP majority in the House by pressing ahead with a vote to repeal the nation's recent health care reform on the basis that the law "kills jobs," and because in the recent campaign his party had promised the American people it would take such action. Laying aside the merits of these claims and the issue of whether a majority of Americans favors repeal (in fact, about 70 percent do not according to recent national polls), and the fact that successful House action will result in no change, as the Democratically controlled Senate has already vowed not to take up any such bill, the Speaker's choice and his rhetoric concerning it have raised another important question. When reporters asked Boehner how a repeal could save money when the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) had released an analysis stating repeal would cost the Treasury \$23 billion over 10 years,¹ Boehner did not argue the merits of that office's analysis. Instead, he suggested the CBO was entitled to its "opinion" and he had a rather different one.

Whatever his arguments for repeal, and however genuine or contrived his stance may be, this rhetoric does nothing to educate voters on the concerns at play, or offer a rationale for Boehner's perspective. Boehner's decision not to offer reasons for his dismissal of the CBO analysis has two damaging consequences for democratic dialogue and deliberation. The first arises from his delegitimation of a leading arm of Congress, the Congressional Budget Office. The second result is reduced potential for democratic deliberation in national public policy-making.

Congress established the Congressional Budget Office in 1974 as part of a broader reform to equip the legislature with capacity to sort through the President's budget and presidential rhetoric concerning it, and to ascertain the likely fiscal impacts of specific policy choices. By all accounts the Office has undertaken that responsibility with impeccable nonpartisanship and high professional standards in the ensuing decades. Its work has long drawn praise from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle in Congress as well as from congressional and budget scholars.

Indeed, in practice CBO has provided Congress the nonpartisan institutional wherewithal to check the resource allocation claims of the

executive branch and of its own members. Nonetheless, the new Speaker, while presumably very much aware of these key CBO roles and reputation, chose to argue the Office had offered an “opinion” rather than an analysis and he had another, as if that settled the matter. Boehner rhetorically dismissed the agency and its work by relegating it to the status of a source of opinion. E. B. White famously warned of the implications of this sort of rhetoric: “Prejudice is a great time saver. You can form opinions without having to get the facts.”² Boehner’s rhetoric undermined not only the role of the CBO in providing dispassionate policy analysis, but also any effort to provide deliberative claims by relabeling such as “opinion.”

While this may allow the leader to escape the necessity to provide reasons for his or her views, and it may be an artful way to end bothersome questions about one’s stance, it nonetheless undercuts the potential for democratic dialogue. In this case, it goes further to diminish a key Congressional office whose work has been used to conduct a more informed conversation concerning policy alternatives. If such capacity is not valued and protected by our nation’s principal political leaders, it is difficult to discern how we (citizens and leaders collectively) can conduct anything like an informed discussion of policy issues. Shall we instead simply recur to rule by expressed fiat? Or, perhaps, to rule by the “opinions” of those in power, with no dialogue or regard for minority or competing views? The corrosive dangers of this sort of rhetorical turn for democracy, should it become commonplace, are obvious. Speaker Boehner knows better and should make it a point at an early opportunity to offer arguments for his claims, to laud the CBO for its nonpartisan analyses and to engage those reports with arguments when he disagrees with them. The possibility of democratic deliberation demands no less.

(Originally published January 8, 2011)

Notes

¹ Congressional Budget Office. 2010. Selected CBO publications related to health care legislation, 2009–2010. Publication no. 4228. Available at: <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/111th-congress-2009-2010/reports/12-23-selectedhealthcarepublications.pdf>

² White, E.B. n.d. Quodid.com. Available at: <http://quodid.com/quotes/5413/e-b-white/prejudice-is-a-great-time-saver-you-can>.

9 American Federalism and the Enduring Myth of a False Sovereign

Business historian John Steele Gordon recently offered a commentary (February 1, 2011) on the nationally syndicated public radio program, *Marketplace*, concerning the American states and their relative capacity to declare bankruptcy.¹ His focus occasioned an analysis of what he argued were the underlying conditions created by American federalism that made such declarations very difficult. Whatever the merits of his views on the possibilities of state bankruptcy, and these are quite likely why he was perceived as sufficiently expert to appear on the show, his argument revealed he did not understand United States federalism. While that fact is lamentable, it is still more regrettable that his perspective endures and continues to be believed by many Americans despite its historical and factual inaccuracy.

Gordon offered three fallacious claims. First, he argued the “states created the federal government, not the other way around.”² In fact, each state created popular conventions to consider the proposed national framework and it was those gatherings, and not state legislatures, that ratified the new Constitution. The distinguished historian, Pauline Maier, details the fascinating politics of these bodies in an excellent new book, *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution: 1787-1788*.³ Second, Gordon asserted “the American states are sovereign, except as they voluntarily surrendered aspects of sovereignty to the federal government.”⁴ This argument, too, is false. Sovereignty in the United States inheres in neither the states nor the federal government, but in the nation’s citizenry. The American regime rests on popular sovereignty. As a practical matter, the federal government may claim it represents that sovereign most closely and so it represents that national aggregation of citizens supremely between elections. But the United States government is not sovereign; the people who elect and sustain it are.

Similarly, neither Alabama nor New Mexico nor any other state, can lay claim to such standing as none is supremely sovereign vis-a-vis its own citizens, as these are citizens of the United States first and thereafter residents of their various states. This fact is made plain when state claims contravene the democratically determined will of the nation and are therefore set aside, or when a citizen of any state decides they need to obtain

a passport to declare citizenship. Finally, as many before, Gordon equates state governments' authority to serve their citizens with sovereignty. Governments may possess authority, but that fact alone does not, and need not, imply sovereignty.⁵ Such is certainly the case for states in the United States.

All of the above arguments are well known, so why do contentions such as those offered by Gordon endure? One possible reason may be that the business historian and others mistake the Founders' interest in ensuring subnational governments the capacity to serve the needs of a disparate and diverse population with the conferral of sovereignty. One may have a federal system without such delegation and still permit very substantial decentralization of both national and state-level public services. Another reason for the persistence of these false arguments may lie in a misunderstanding of why the Founders created a federal republic in the first instance. While the Framers were certainly aware of the strengths and weaknesses of decentralized governance for administrative organization and services delivery, federalism was created for larger political reasons. The Founders argued that each level of government—state and federal—would be positioned well to guard against the possible development of tyranny in either. The states could petition the nation to secure against federally sanctioned despotism and the nation could certainly exercise power to prevent or overcome state-level threats to citizen liberties.

In fact, as it is easier to galvanize a local population to tyrannical action than to mobilize a much broader national citizenry to such acts, the nation historically has more often checked state excesses than the reverse. Nonetheless, it is surely possible for the states to check despotic national action. And it was this mutual political capacity to act to ensure freedom, along with the obvious advantages states enjoyed in responding to the localized needs of their populations, that the Founders found most powerfully attractive about federalism. Nonetheless, even with these arguments, it remains unclear why this mythology concerning state sovereignty continues to surround American federalism. Perhaps it is simply too alluring for would-be pundits not to make such claims, however erroneously, out of ignorance or when such statements suit their ideological or emotional predilections. Whatever the reasons, this argument continues to mislead thousands of Americans concerning the nature of their regime 150 years following a bloody civil war fought in part to reaffirm the nation's

original claims to popular sovereignty. Gordon is heir to a long, if profoundly misleading and lamentable, tradition.

(Originally published February 6, 2011)

Notes

¹ Gordon, John Steele. 2011. "States Declaring Bankruptcy?" *Marketplace*, February 1. Available at: <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2011/02/01/pm-states-declaring-bankruptcy>.

² Gordon, "States Declare Bankruptcy."

³ Maier, Pauline. 2011. *Ratification: People Debate the Constitution: 1778-1788*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

⁴ Gordon, "States Declare Bankruptcy."

⁵ Gordon, "States Declare Bankruptcy."

10 The Debt Crisis and American Governance

The long-time conservative columnist and commentator George Will remarks in his column of July 21, 2011, that the Tea Party is essentially the best thing to happen to American politics in generations.¹ This is so, in his view, because that group has so relentlessly focused on the pressures now confronting the nation's budget and the need to rein in government expenditure and "undue public sector growth" to address the matter. Few disinterested observers doubt that the nation needs to address its long-term expenditure and revenue mix, so, on its face; this would seem a healthful debate. But interestingly, thus far it has not proved a deliberation at all.

Instead, Tea Party groups are not calling for selected and largely needed entitlement and Social Security program reforms and tax structure and provision modifications. To the extent that these groups have offered any details, they want changes that encompass only one side of the budget equation and overwhelmingly involve massive reductions in the nation's domestic non-defense expenditures. In addition, GOP members and leaders in the House of Representatives particularly, have tied their Party to the Tea Party movement and to a self-imposed "debate" concerning raising the nation's debt limit and reducing federal expenditures. And more, these members and leaders have thus far steadfastly refused any effort to compromise differences among the parties concerning budget matters to address the national imperative to raise the debt limit.

So, in this self-inflicted political scenario in which a legitimate long-term concern has been tied to a short-term national need on which at least one side to date has refused all compromise, the country edges toward what business leaders and economists alike fear will be a catastrophic default that no one purports to want. The obvious question is, why? The most frequently advanced explanation is political: Many GOP members from otherwise safe Republican districts fear challenges from the right in primaries in the next electoral cycle if they give on the "tax" issue. They worry that zealots are much more likely to vote in primaries and they could lose due to the organized efforts of a relatively small group. These Members have refused compromises and have shown no real inclination or interest in assuming responsibility to govern.

A second argument often offered to explain the intransigence of many GOP members in the House is that they have simply latched on to an absolute ideological belief that the current national government, and government more generally (at least the nation's federal government), are evil weeds inimical to the country's future. But, neither argument reaches the question of leaders seeking to do what is right and responsible for the commons or broader public, or recognizes the legitimacy of alternate points of view. The first explanation—electoral concerns—is about maintaining personal power, while the second demands that one party's beliefs prevail against all comers without compromise.

Will, like so many other conservatives today, now contends that nirvana lies with the defeat of President Obama in 16 months. I want here briefly to challenge the assumption that President Obama is alone responsible for the nation's current situation or that his replacement will magically address it, as well as the implications of such an assumption for our nation's ongoing capacity to govern itself. It seems to me that Will and those he now embraces fail to address several fundamental questions, irrespective of one's partisanship:

- What economic plan, beyond symbolic claims, do the Tea Party and many in the GOP (House) especially, now offer? Why should the American people de facto abandon the lion's share of their domestic programs, and what will be the consequences of such action for the broader state of society of doing so? In short, if such is the aim, as seems to be the case, are those supporting it willing to outline it clearly and debate its purport, rather than simply hurl epithets at leaders of the opposing party, calling them Marxists or worse? Can a debate be had on the merits of the competing views offered, rather than on specious claims of untrustworthy villainy or allegations of tainted philosophy?
- How did the nation reach its current fiscal situation during the last several decades, and what role did (do) large increases in national spending and deficits under the George W. Bush administration, alongside tax reductions during that presidency, have in securing the current situation? How are the present wars in Afghanistan and Iraq being financed and why? How much are those conflicts now costing? What are their fiscal and policy implications and how might those be addressed in the long run?

- What rationale can be offered, besides a presupposed ideological certainty, with which others are certainly entitled to disagree, for the apparent belief among many GOP leaders that current public choices do not already reflect the very substantial influence of the nation's for-profit institutions? Why are continued tax reductions for the most wealthy sacrosanct, while programs aimed at the poor, literacy and education are not? And why should tax expenditures for corporations be continued in the face of the latter's strong and sustained profitability? What role did ongoing deregulation of the financial industry play in creating the nation's recent financial crisis? Should the country now be engaged in a debate concerning whether additional changes to national policy to prevent potential future corporate excesses now be occurring? If not, why not? In short, why should proposed federal expenditure reductions come disproportionately at the expense of the poor, disadvantaged and the elderly and its civil functions? What roles could the private sector (and citizenry more broadly) play in assisting the nation in charting a new long-term budgetary course? More generally, how much public policy advantage and subsidy should the wealthy and private firms enjoy in the name of their "job creating" role in an otherwise purportedly democratic society? How much income inequality is the society willing to tolerate on the same argument?

These questions, and many more that might be offered, suggest the need for a dialogue about governance and not absolutist symbolic posturing replete with name-calling and identification of false or orchestrated demons. Addressing each of these questions thoughtfully implies tough choices and developing an honest conversation concerning alternatives with the American people. Unfortunately, few would-be GOP intellectual or political leaders now appear willing to develop such a dialogue. Instead, many increasingly turn to efforts to demonize President Barack Obama as the source of all difficulties. Governance and the nation will surely suffer the longer such a patently absurd situation continues. Real governance issues demand our lawmakers' attention and they are plainly not now receiving it. It is far too late for shrill posturing and positioning for real or imagined partisan advantage.

(Originally published July 24, 2011)

Notes

¹ Will, George. 2011. "Patience, Tea Partyers: Time is on your side," *The Washington Post*, July 21. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/sustaining-the-unsustainable/2011/07/21/gIQA16mtRI_story.html?utm_term=.7c8cc47b3423.

11 The Politics of Choosing between Scylla and Charybdis

Now that the country has narrowly avoided what most financial and political leaders here and abroad regarded as the likely cataclysm of a national default, the newspapers, blogosphere, magazines and airwaves are literally rife with stories and commentaries attempting to make sense of this self-imposed and agonizing national political ordeal. Predictably perhaps, many are writing on “who won” and “who lost” and for what reasons. Others, more interesting to be sure, are searching for explanations of why this near catastrophe occurred.

One stable of writers, including the noted economist Paul Krugman of *The New York Times*, concluded even before the ink had dried on the deal that the president had surrendered to those seeking to abandon the nation’s traditionally tenuous safety net of social programs. In this view, President Obama was outwitted or weak or maladroit, or all of these, and he gave away the store to those “ruthless” leaders of the GOP and Tea Party who could never win similar concessions at the polls. These authors contend the explanation for the final deal including only expenditure reductions is a misguided or pusillanimous leader who was outwitted by smarter and stronger, if perhaps less admirable, individuals. These analysts argue President Obama should and could have behaved differently, and had he done so, the significant reductions now on tap for the nation’s domestic budget would not be set to occur in so unbalanced (in their view) a way.

Other commentators, meanwhile, including the redoubtable Elizabeth Drew in the current issue of the *New York Review of Books*, have attributed the President’s apparently inexplicable and presumptively anti-Democratic stand to pursue deficit reduction and to remove billions of federal spending from the national economy when that economy is already stagnant and suffering from very high unemployment levels, not as weakness or misguidedness, but as pure political opportunism.¹ Or, to put the matter more politely, perhaps, the President behaved as he did out of political pragmatism. President Obama, in Drew’s view, has been persuaded by his political advisors that to pursue what many citizens believe to be a pragmatic and necessary stance of strong deficit reduction (however dubious in the near term in many economist’s eyes) puts him in especially strong stead

with the independent voters he will need to attract to prevail in 2012. In this interpretation, neither the public interest nor the President's presumed character flaws caused the revenue-less final agreement. It resulted instead from simple political calculus. Whether that is a defensible stance depends in part on how you regard the bargain struck.

Finally, the voluble Robert Reich, Secretary of Labor under President Clinton and now Professor of Politics at the University of California, Berkeley, has suggested that a specific group within the GOP with Tea Party sympathies held the nation hostage in this episode to its dogmatic anti-national government stance with what he believes will be long-term negative consequences for the poor, the elderly and all other vulnerable groups.² I want to focus here on an implication of Reich's argument that he does not reach.

Reich's contention, coupled with the "explanations" outlined above, raises a vexing question. On what basis did hardline rabidly anti-tax and anti-government GOP representatives believe they were acting when they tied their "no compromise" call for sharp deficit reduction to the need for the nation to raise its debt ceiling? Was it simply ideology, as many have averred? That is, did those making the claim decide a priori that sharp reductions in federal civil spending were both necessary and appropriate and conclude on that basis that their stance was appropriate or even prudent? That is, did ideology find this group arguing that the end justified the means?

But even if those making the claim were small-government ideologues (as many doubtless are), that does not explain their evident willingness to humiliate their own party leader when he appeared to them too willing to compromise with the President. Nor does it explain the apparent willingness of many in this number, including GOP presidential hopeful Michele Bachmann, to sacrifice the nation's good faith and credit, and perhaps its economy and potentially that of many others internationally, to an absolutized and dogmatic assertion of its claims.

Nor, finally, does it, in fact, justify why the group thought it appropriate in the first place to use the debt ceiling as a cudgel to gain its way. Reich calls this stand "holding the nation hostage," but I am left wondering if it de facto represents the emergence of a brand of minority tyranny. Let me be clear: Whether adopted by progressives or conservatives, absolutism implies a willingness to delegitimize a share of the citizenry simply to gain one's preferences. When such is imposed (de facto or otherwise) that stance can only be labeled for what it is, a brand of tyranny. Moreover, as a matter of

fact, opinion polls indicate that the majority of Americans do not agree with the stance of the (largely) House group that took this stand, nor do they embrace the specific policy aims of this set of partisans.

And one might ask, too, whether demanding “no compromise” and being prepared to carry the nation into default to avoid such an outcome represents an ethical breach with the nation and with the leaders’ oath of office. House and Senate members are elected not to serve an ideology or even a state or district alone, but the nation. On what basis could it be argued that default was in the nation’s (or indeed globe’s) interest? If there is a claim for default here, why not take the matter to the electorate in the coming election cycle? More deeply, and perhaps more pressingly, who empowered a small group of elected officials representing a minority of the population (perhaps 17 to 18 percent of all voters share these views) to make these claims while threatening to place the nation in default if they were not met?

While I do not have answers to these concerns, they raise additional and unsettling issues. Did the President and other leaders really have any other responsible choice but to deal with those who would not deal? What are the implications for the nation and for freedom of continuing to make political choices in this way? Like many Americans, I am at a loss to articulate how the President should have dealt differently with a rabidly ideological coterie, many of whom perceive him as illegitimate as a leader and who were willing to sacrifice the nation to default to realize their particular beliefs. To say this is unsettling is to understate significantly the challenge to democratic governance in the United States this turn represents.

(Originally published August 3, 2011)

Notes

¹ Drew, Elizabeth. 2011. “What Were They Thinking,” *New York Review of Books*, August 18. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/08/18/what-were-they-thinking/>.

² Reich, Robert. 2011. “The Rise of the Wrecking Ball Right,” Robert Reich (website), July 15. Available at: <http://robertreich.org/post/7652593366>.

12 Are We Witnessing the End of Shame in American Political Discourse?

My Oxford dictionary lists a number of definitions for “shame,” including, “Regard for propriety or decency, a restraint on behavior.”¹ Webster’s dictionary defines shame as a “painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety.”² I share these definitions as I have lately been reflecting on the erosion of any sense of propriety among many of our public leaders and would-be thought leaders in our nation’s current political dialogue. While both partisans of progressive and conservative positions have arguably advanced rhetoric with little or no relationship to reality in recent times and done so without any evident sense of shame, it is the conservatives who appear to have produced an industry of such rhetoric and publications to press it. Indeed, a stable of specific right-leaning authors has been producing partisan screeds of this sort with some regularity in recent years and steadily selling hundreds of thousands of copies of them to the faithful. Progressives meanwhile, seem neither to take far-left authors so seriously nor to allow their ideas such sway.

Michael Tomasky has recently argued in the *New York Review of Books* that outlandish purplish rhetoric has now displaced and drives ideas within this group of authors, rather than the reverse, which would traditionally obtain.³ Here are several recent examples:

It has lately become a GOP talking point to argue that raising the issue of the rising inequality in income in the United States and asking that it be considered in light of the nation’s fiscal situation and relative wealth and taxation levels constitutes “class war.” Since those same partisans argue for a supposed opportunity society in which classes cannot be said to exist, it is difficult to understand what such assertions actually mean. More importantly, it is unclear why all discussion of income inequality and fairness should not be a part of political debate in a nation dedicated to democratic equality as one of its central aspirations.

GOP leaders, including House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, have also labeled the current peaceful protests on Wall Street in New York, which raise these concerns, the product of “mobs,” a point wholly unrelated to the factual

events unfolding in that city. The rhetoric may appeal to the partisan or fearful or perhaps both, but it bears no relationship to reality.

Conservative broadcast personality and writer Ann Coulter has authored a spate of texts in recent years aimed at the conservative base that employ over-the-top rhetoric to tar the opposition as not only wrong on policy, but innately untrustworthy and out of control. Her current illustrative text is entitled *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob is Endangering America* and here is a claim typical of the enflamed rhetoric within it:

The Democratic Party is the party of the mob, irrespective of what the mob represents. Democrats activate mobs, depend on mobs, publicize and celebrate mobs—they are the mob. Indeed, the very idea of a “community organizer” is to stir up a mob for some political purpose.⁴

Any nonpartisan observer would wonder at the claim that the Democratic Party exists to encourage mobs or that community organizing amounts to mob tyranny by definition. Her second claim would come as news to Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi who led social movements for democratic rights at the grassroots. Neither advocated mobocracy or tyranny, nor does democratic organization necessarily connote mob rule. Coulter’s claims bear no relationship to reality.

These examples might be multiplied and an analysis of how these sorts of arguments have become a daily mantra to be repeated among Party leaders might be undertaken. But that seems unnecessary to make four basic points. First, many political and thought leaders in our society appear to have lost any sense of shame as they advance their rhetorical claims to the broader electorate. The Coulter and Cantor exemplar rhetoric is not just exaggeration or “vote for the good guys” sorts of assertions, but outlandish statements untethered to reality. These arguments appear to have no purpose but to emphasize the “otherness” and repugnant character of any who would adopt a different point-of-view. Second, rhetoric without any link to reality and prosecuted without shame is potentially dangerous as it can convince many that those who disagree are not worthy of respect, and thereby undermine the central condition necessary for democratic exchange and possibility in a heterogeneous society. Third, these screeds and this sort of outrageousness illustrate just how far from a modicum of civility our civic discourse has strayed. Last, this form of rhetoric can now be pressed

instantaneously and across multiple media platforms, resulting in a reach beyond anything that has existed previously in American history.

To the extent a complete erosion of shame as a motivator among our officials and thought leaders is underway or has occurred, we have entered a new and potentially dangerous phase in our politics. Those offering these claims have apparently lost capacity to discipline themselves and their sales (of books and media as well as perceived successes in politics) will do little to dissuade them to moderate or change their behavior. Indeed, what might provide incentive to change this deeply distressing trend is not now obvious. What is clear is how this rhetorical politics without shame is degrading our political discourse and corroding democratic possibility.

(Originally published October 10, 2011)

Notes

¹ Brown, Lesley. Ed. 1993. "Shame." *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 2810.

² Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Shame." Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shame>.

³ Tomasky, Michael. 2011. "Republican Days of Wrath," *New York Review of Books*, September 29. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/09/29/republican-days-wrath/>.

⁴ Coulter, Ann. 2011. *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob is Endangering America*. New York, NY: Crown Forum, p. 4.

13 The ‘Southern Strategy’ Revisited

So, the GOP presidential race to date has come to this: A candidate has won a large victory in a Southern state’s primary by employing the same tactics as the much criticized and once discredited “Southern Strategy” first used by Richard Nixon. Newt Gingrich has won “a smashing victory” (as one news outlet put it) in South Carolina by appealing to an undercurrent of anti-African-American racism and inveighing against a never defined “national establishment” represented most visibly by his attacks on the “elite media” (also never defined). Never mind, as *The New York Times* reports today, that Gingrich himself must be counted a central part of any “national establishment” or the millions he has earned from his engagement with it.¹

Never mind, too, that his thinly veiled references to a perceived African-American lack of work ethic and laziness, in response to a questioner at a debate as Gingrich lectured him on the sums expended as “handouts” to black citizens, are wholly without empirical foundation. The candidate also traveled the state arguing President Barack Obama “put” more people on food stamps than any chief executive in American history. Never mind the claim is not true, as the President cannot “put” anyone on food stamps, and the number of assistance recipients was larger under President George Bush. Moreover, many more SNAP recipients are non-Hispanic whites than African-Americans.

These facts do not matter. Gingrich, as many before him, is out to identify scapegoats to placate fearful voters, and who better to blame in a climate of fear than an inchoate (and even better, effete) “them” and a long-maligned and feared minority. Here is a politics of mobilization by appeal to fear and prejudice against the “other.” Never mind complex explanations, never mind messy reality; democratic elections can be won by mobilizing around nasty instincts and emotions that offer ready explanations for complex concerns.

There is no way to sugarcoat this ugly turn. It is the basest form of democratic politics, and it is dangerous in its implications for our polity’s capacity to deal with difference and to secure the rights of all of its citizens. Regardless of partisanship, no one should stand aside and let this sort of thing happen unheralded. It must be dubbed what it is. The chairman of the Republican Party publicly apologized in 2005 for his party’s past use of these tools in the guise of the Southern Strategy. They are just as reprehensible

today. To “win” by appeal to the darkest forces of the human psyche cannot be justified because it “works.”

The nation and its political parties had once put the mobilization strategies so in evidence in Gingrich’s campaign in South Carolina behind them. Their return, in whatever guise, is a pox on the nation and should be criticized as the obnoxious malady they represent. Democratic elections are not merely about power, but about governance. One cannot govern a heterogeneous nation by polarizing it for electoral purposes. Americans of all political persuasions should resist strongly this return to a dispiriting politics of division, disparagement and disempowerment.

(Originally published January 23, 2012)

Notes

- ¹ Rutenberg, Jim. 2012. “Gingrich wins South Carolina Primary, Upending G.O.P. Race,” *The New York Times*, January 22. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/us/politics/south-carolina-republican-primary.html>.

14 Pondering the Character of Democratic Community and Possibility

I reviewed an academic article this week that treated currently competing conceptualizations of how democratic societies can develop most equitably and effectively. In one view, the neoliberal perspective, largely dominant among many major industrialized nations, including the United States, since the late 1970s and exported by them through their aid policies, development is to be secured by placing increasing faith in the market instead of the state and by emphasizing export-led trade and capital mobility. This orientation argues that the roughly two-thirds of the globe's human population living on less than \$1 per day will be lifted ultimately from their abject poverty by markets and that even benevolently intentioned government actions on their behalf most often serve merely to undermine the efficacy of such an approach. In consequence, in this view, public sector reach and range of activity should be minimized. An alternate conception of society, the human security position, suggests that human beings, because they are human and for no other reason, should exist in societies in which at least their minimum basic needs are met. In this view, societies, read governments, should ensure that all in their midst enjoy human dignity and the capacity to participate meaningfully in their communities. The last criterion implies a life without immiseration and endemic disease and without a daily struggle simply to survive.

This same dichotomy of views has characterized American politics during at least the same period that it has dominated international politics. Neoliberals continue to contend, even as poverty and inequality have risen markedly here in the United States, that the market prescription remains apt. In this view, government is the central problem in obtaining economic growth in developed as well as developing nations. Adherents of this perspective contend aid to the poor and hungry undermines their incentive to work and to assume individual responsibility for themselves and their families. Almost any sort of government regulation is also suspect as a force that can only erode entrepreneurial initiative and thereby slow or prevent job growth.

The major GOP presidential candidates have adopted the neo-liberal prescription for American society in their current campaign. These individuals argue government is preventing a more rapid expansion of the American economy and the current relatively high levels of poverty, unemployment and income inequality can only be ameliorated by still greater reliance on the market. Like their international counterparts, the Republican candidates do not suggest how, precisely, such a prescription will diminish inequality or result in opportunities for the most poor. The argument seems to be that capitalism alone can create these conditions in the long pull and its efficacy should be taken largely on faith. Meanwhile, those currently impoverished should take advantage of the opportunities that will be created by government's ongoing withdrawal from social action. Very little is said concerning how well positioned those populations might be to take such steps, assuming they do, in fact, become available.

Meanwhile, Democrats come closer to adopting the human security position domestically and surely do not predicate their governance philosophy on an anti-government stance, but they too emphasize the market as at least a principal arbiter of human dignity. What is interesting about this debate at both the domestic and international scales, is what it implies not only for the provenance of democratic governance, but also for the character of society. Aristotle long ago argued that humans could not become fully human without engagement in political community. The neo-liberal claim turns that frame on its head and contends that human beings are most free and most human when the market is used to arbitrate all significant social possibilities and they have the opportunity to avail themselves of its workings. The political community, or government acting in its name, voluntarily cedes its authority and legitimacy to play a role in human development and possibility to the workings of the market. Understood in this way, our society is not merely revisiting a long-running debate over the rightful role of government in our political economy (surely always appropriate and salient), but is now engaged in a different controversy altogether: whether the market or political community should be architectonic in democratic societies. This is occurring at both the domestic and international scales and on its ultimate resolution may hinge how freedom itself is understood as well as whether and how societies define and address both political and economic equality and possibility.

(Originally published January 30, 2012)

15 Revisiting Dual Sovereignty

The columnist George Will recently argued that the coming U.S. Supreme Court hearing concerning the constitutionality of the nation's recently enacted health care act (which he labels, one supposes as an ideological signal adopted by the Republicans, "Obamacare") will test the "Constitution's architecture of dual sovereignty."¹ Will, as many self-proclaimed conservatives before him, argues the people are not alone sovereign in our nation, but the states are also sovereign.

I am struck at the continuing power of this myth. History teaches that the major share of the nation's Founders repudiated the Articles of Confederation as unworkable precisely because they accorded such standing to states and that the Civil War was also fought in part on the principle that only the nation-state could claim sovereignty as the lone legitimate representative of the national body politic. States do not and cannot act for the nation and may not pretend to act legitimately on behalf of its citizenry collectively. Nor, did state legislatures serve as venues for adoption of the Constitution. Nonetheless, the myth of states as sovereign actors persists, despite the weight of evidence and long argument that the people collectively, acting through their duly elected and appointed institutions at the national level, are alone legitimately sovereign.

The intriguing question is why. One reason may well be because states constitute another venue for policy choice-making and, of course, may serve as a place for broader mobilization for efforts to secure change in national policies. Rather than rely on such recourse alone or on the courts as arbitrators of disputes, however, those disagreeing with this or that national action may wish instead to enjoy the weight of reverence for the Constitution working on their behalf. More deeply, such standing implies a formal legitimacy for their views that they might otherwise not obtain. Then too, claims that states are sovereign can legitimize active disregard of national will and actions, as John C. Calhoun in the run up to the Civil War proposed or many segregationists argued more recently.

It is important to stress that to say that states do not enjoy sovereignty does not make them irrelevant as policy or administrative actors. The national government nearly always relies on states to implement its domestic policies to ensure their sensitivity to regional and locally specific

needs and, of course, states are key independent actors in many areas of public service delivery as well. Nonetheless, for Will and others, none of this is sufficient. They seem to fear national capacity to tyrannize and so demand “state sovereignty” as a counterweight. That power is surely latent, but preventing its inappropriate use does not lie principally in according standing to state governments they do not possess, but instead in ensuring an informed and deliberative citizenry and officialdom willing to wrestle with the complexities of providing government services to a heterogeneous and dynamic nation.

False dichotomies and persistent claims on behalf of an overused myth do nothing to address that challenge or to mitigate its difficulties. Perhaps more time should be spent tackling that central concern rather than debating continuously whether the people collectively can be sovereign in a nation whose Constitution is dedicated to preservation of just that end.

(Originally published February 2, 2012)

Notes

¹ Will, George. 2012. “Will the Supreme Court Strike Back at Obama’s Overreach?” *The Washington Post*, January 22. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/will-the-supreme-court-strike-back-at-obamas-overreach/2016/01/22/1af0b1b0-c077-11e5-83d4-42e3bceea902_story.html?utm_term=.4509d10441ca.

16 The Idea of the Nation

Some 30 years ago the eminent political scientist Samuel Beer wrote an article for *The New Republic* in which he questioned the implications for what he called the idea of the nation of then-President Ronald Reagan's declaration that "government" was the nation's most pressing challenge.¹ We now know the Reagan years ushered in a period of neoliberal politics in which it has become common currency for elected leaders in the United States and Europe to argue that economic growth requires smaller government, diminished regulation of market actors and, in general, increased political support for the market and for investors and investment capital in society. If anything, as I have written recently, this predilection has only deepened in our society and politics since the Reagan presidency, with all of the current Republican presidential candidates adopting the neoliberal stance as axiomatic.

Mitt Romney, for example, has advocated for \$180 billion more in tax cuts for the wealthiest in society with accompanying sharp reductions in food stamp and Medicaid expenditures. Other proposed Romney reductions are targeted at—to use the GOP rhetoric of the moment—other “job killing” agencies and programs whose efforts are aimed at preventing environmental degradation, ensuring energy sustainability or assuring access to transportation for the poor and those of modest income. Romney has coupled calls for these efforts with perhaps the harshest stance of all the current candidates on immigration.

President Reagan, ever the pragmatist, who engineered tax increases when he judged them necessary, would likely be surprised at the vociferousness of this turn. At the outset of this era, Beer predicted that Reagan's rhetoric on federalism and his desire to eliminate as much of the domestic federal role as possible, signaled an unheralded debate concerning the nation's vision of itself. Were we to be the people envisioned by the Framers of a single vital and heterogeneous country, or were we instead to be balkanized around region and state and interested only in our own privatized welfare and uninterested in the common good claims of others in our midst? Were we to define as “other” even those from different states and economic circumstances, or to imagine that we shared a common identity

and future as Americans, irrespective of our geographic location and personal economic circumstances?

Beer argued the idea of nation in so vast and diverse a country cannot simply be assumed, and its sinews, built as they are on shared symbolic aspirations and broad values, can surely be undermined. One consequence of continued and increasingly virulent rhetoric, from would-be leaders and elected officials alike, that the nation's government (the only "real" symbol of the nation) represents its greatest and most negative challenge might well be the realization of Beer's fear. That is, it no longer seems beyond the pale to be concerned that citizens could be persuaded to delegitimize their government as a social force to address the negative impacts and inequalities created by the market in favor of increasing reliance on capitalism as sole arbiter of both political and economic matters in society. To do so would weaken, if not break, democratic claims by definition, further fray the bonds among the nation's disparate citizenry and empty the idea of a single united nation of all meaning. The result would likely be a still more vigorously individualistic, thoroughly privatized and less charitable population.

It seems unlikely this could occur overnight, but we have witnessed decades of such rhetoric that goes far beyond a healthy democratic skepticism and we are now in the midst of the Tea Party Movement, whose adherents see government tyranny in efforts to secure energy sustainability and have branded global warming a myth of overweening national and international elites. It no longer appears farfetched not only to discuss the enervation of the idea of the nation, but to worry it will come the cropper amidst supposed efforts on behalf of individual liberty. It is difficult to see this continuing trend as anything but deeply concerning. The federal government is not an "other" to be repudiated or worse, but the only avenue available for the emergence and maintenance of national unity and action. The American nation is not a vast territory of assorted enclaves, rich and poor, ethnic and not, in competition with one another for the favors of market actors or a supposed unerring market. Instead, the United States is a single sovereign people at least potentially united by a shared devotion to freedom and democratic possibility.

(Originally published February 4, 2012)

Notes

- ¹ Beer, Samuel. 1982. "The Idea of the Nation," *The New Republic*, July 19.
Available at: <https://newrepublic.com/article/62163/the-idea-the-nation>.

17 Democracy's Enduring Tensions

In each of the last two semesters I have been privileged to read democratic theory with two different gifted doctoral students. Last term, one student read theorists with deep interest in how democratic civic virtues—to use the old-fashioned term—are developed and maintained in societies in ways that conduce finally to effective self-governance. This semester's readings focus much more closely on the conditions necessary to secure deliberation in democratic decision-making. These opportunities to consider again many key readings on democracy have sharpened my awareness of several central tensions and abiding concerns in assuring both a democratic form of governance and the freedom we often associate with such a regime. I share a number of those here briefly in the hope they provoke additional discussion.

First, a nation cannot maintain democracy by voting and formal institutions alone. Exercising the franchise, as important as that may be, offers no protection from ill-informed or tyrannical choices. Indeed, history suggests that citizens can undo their democracies at the ballot box. A free and fair voting system is a necessary, but insufficient condition to secure freedom and democracy.

Second, the greater the individual autonomy and freedom of choice a democratic system provides its citizens, the more essential it appears to be that the nation's acculturated norms, values and practices equip those individuals with the capacity to discipline their own will to self-interest on behalf of the commons. Unless such can occur without coercive government intervention to ensure it (itself tyrannical) from generation to generation, it is not clear what will prevent freedom from being displaced by license. Indeed, it is arguable our nation is undergoing just such a process now, in which America's citizens, when making public choices, are increasingly unwilling to consider the commons or other interests beyond their own privatized concerns.

Third, if the prior point holds, it follows that clarion calls to place more power or authority in the hands of "the people" should be leavened by sober consideration concerning how to insure those individuals possess the information they need to make discerning judgments on the one hand, and the requisite reasoning and emotional capacities (read: self-reflexiveness, self-discipline and a strong empathetic imagination and willingness to act on

it) to do so, on the other hand. None of these ends is easily accomplished, and the freer the society, as noted above, the less control any one actor may possess to influence either concern.

Fourth, heterogeneity (in interests and demographics) poses difficulties for democracy, as diversity makes forming majorities innately more difficult and, more particularly, it poses significant challenges at the individual level in overcoming anxiety and fears of alterity and difference in favor of shared claims and aspirations.

Fifth, for all of the above noted reasons, democracy is not for Romantics. Its dynamics, released by the freedom it both seeks and enjoys, open space for unfettered avarice, smallness, intolerance, scapegoating and cruelty as well as their opposites. These realities seem set to undo romantic illusions and hopes in short order. Indeed, the tough question is an age-old one: how to maintain freedom for all while relying on individuals to make public decisions.

Last, and perhaps worth special attention, are twin dangers. The first is the omnipresent possibility that one or more individuals will successfully persuade a majority to tyrannize or, more subtly, to take a course not in the collective interest. In such cases, a democratic regime may literally take actions that will hollow or end it. The second danger is the potential that a majority of citizens, lacking adequate knowledge and understanding of even their own interests, will act in ways that permit focused and energetic groups or elites to manipulate them actively and broadly. Democratic manipulation is still tyranny.

These tensions and concerns suffice to show that majoritarianism, even with fair and free elections, cannot protect freedom. Nor, can voting itself ensure deliberation or prevent its own usurpation. These realities are always worth pondering.

(Originally published February 20, 2012)

18 Can a Democratic Electorate be held Accountable?

The Economist this week raises an important and intriguing issue of democratic theory in a column entitled, “Are the Republicans Mad?”¹ The magazine reached its subject by treating a new book by Thomas Mann, of the Brookings Institution, and Norman Ornstein, of the American Enterprise Institute: *It’s Even Worse than it Looks*.² Both men are long-time and deeply respected Congressional analysts. Indeed, I had the privilege of studying with Mann while in graduate school. These two authors’ new book argues that the Republican Party is not only behaving as a parliamentary style organization in its lockstep ideological stands, but also, more importantly, has become, “an insurgent outlier—ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of the political opposition.”³

The Economist opines there is nothing to this critique but two analysts, left and right leaning respectively, who disagree with the stance and policy course the GOP has taken. But, having made this claim, the editors appear to realize their argument is too simple by half and so they acknowledge that their own contention stands or falls on whether voters will correct such distortions as those the authors describe when they occur. Ornstein and Mann do contend, too, that the voters are polarized and ill-positioned to play such a role. For *The Economist* writers, the challenge in their review of Mann and Ornstein’s work thus became how to maintain the argument that all is really well with the American polity and this book’s critique represents two experienced analysts gone off the rail. To address this rhetorical imperative, the editors effectively set their primary concern aside to contend that, as they put it, “America’s voters shy from hard choices. Lexington’s bet is that Americans will never give the Republicans a clean mandate to drown the sort of state they have now. ... They will expect their leaders to muddle through.”⁴

While this argument is doubtless interesting and provocative, it begs four central questions that Mann and Ornstein raise. First, what if Americans do allow such a majority, which some election analysts are now arguing is indeed quite possible? Do we then “hope for the best” that the leaders who have adopted such an ideology will elect to jettison it in favor of a

more prudent course? All recent evidence suggests that likelihood is small. Secondly, and less important perhaps, this position raises the question of whether lawmakers ever take stances that in effect prevent the regime from operating as envisaged. Our political system is one of separate institutions sharing power, and to function it demands compromise. It was not constructed to accommodate lock-step rigidity or the wholesale demonization of the “Other” party (or parties). It seems safe to say that no Founder imagined one party (when those shortly emerged formally and clearly after the nation’s founding) assuming a stance of intractable opposition to virtually anything another offered, nor a party simply declaring as illegitimate all policy not fitting its current ideological view, even when its architects were members of its own party (as now occurs daily among Republicans). This understanding was so, despite the often-bitter differences among political leaders of the time.

Third, and more deeply, *The Economist* editors, in their critique, effectively refused to hold American voters accountable for the choices they have made and may make. The editors’ tautological argument rests on the view the nation would somehow muddle through and that voters’ desire for low taxes and high services makes “realistic” sense (since voters hold such a desire, it cannot be easily changed and so, therefore, it is “realistic” so to assume) and in any case, the opportunity costs of proceeding in such a fashion for decades can somehow be borne by future generations.

Fourth, it strikes me that the magazine’s editors are not alone in their belief that their position is “realistic.” Again, their primary argument seems to be that it is “realistic” to accept voters where they are, even when one notes at the same time that the population’s basic stance makes no sense. In this view, one must begin with what voters want. Doing so does not demand that one inquire if what voters ask is either intelligent or prudent in light of either the scale of the polity’s problems or the implications of certain policy courses on offer in its political dialogue. *The Economist* and others who adopt similar stands address neither of these core questions.

Meanwhile, Mann and Ornstein point not to simple policy disagreements, but to the increasing possibility that the party system is no longer working and the nation’s voters are collectively ill-equipped to place it back on course. In short, the primary question *The Economist* steadfastly avoids in its column is whether one can ever hold a democratic citizenry accountable for the frailties and condition of its regime. Mann and Ornstein, as many democratic theorists before them, argue one can and must ask just such

a question, but of course, doing so might prove wildly unpopular with the electorate. Small wonder *The Economist's* editors saw fit not to raise so vexing a question. Far better to tar the messenger than to address so complex a concern; it is always easier in democratic debate to find a way to blame everyone and everything other than the arbiter, who, after all, wields ultimate power at the ballot box. But perhaps we should permit ourselves, as ardent advocates, to examine all dimensions of democratic governance if we are to be best positioned to preserve it. The last listed would seem our most appropriate collective lodestar and not an ill-conceived effort to justify retrospectively whatever obtains as “appropriate” and “realistic.”

(Originally published May 6, 2012)

Notes

¹ Economist editors, 2012. “Are the Republicans Mad?” *The Economist*, April 28. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2012/04/28/are-the-republicans-mad>.

² Mann, Thomas and Norman Ornstein. 2012. *It's Even Worse than it Looks*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

³ Economist editors, “Are the Republicans Mad?”

⁴ Economist editors, “Are the Republicans Mad?”

19 ‘Abandoning the Poor’ as a Political and Social Strategy?

The lead editorial in *The New York Times* this past Wednesday was headlined arrestingly, “The Rush to Abandon the Poor.”¹ The piece focused on Texas Governor Rick Perry’s (R) promise to forego Medicaid support under the nation’s Affordable Health Care Access law despite the fact that his state already has the highest percentage of uninsured citizens in the nation. *The Times* also noted that five other Republican governors have announced they will not expand Medicaid coverage for their uninsured citizens, regardless of the fact that the federal government will defray 100 percent of the cost of doing so for the first three years and 90 percent of that sum thereafter. The newspaper argued that these state executives are using the economic downturn, and their own choice to refuse national support, to ensure ongoing fiscal crises in their states that de facto are eliminating the states’ traditional role as a backstop for the country’s neediest citizens. And more, the *Times* reported these and other GOP-led states are eliminating general assistance payments to the poor and disabled, even as Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett (R) found a way this month simultaneously to make those cuts and to provide \$300 million in new tax reductions for businesses. Other Republican governors and legislatures have reduced or eliminated support for thousands of Medicaid and general assistance recipients in their states as well.

Meanwhile, coincidentally, the Democracy Project of the Brennan Center at New York University released a study of the implications of harsh new voter identification laws in ten states on the same day *The Times* published its editorial.² The nonpartisan analysis, “The Challenge of Obtaining Voter Identification,” found that the controversial new statutes were likely to depress turnout in coming elections among those affected—disproportionately the poor, minorities the disabled and rural area residents—since the cost and logistics of attaining acceptable identification for many citizens in these groups will be sufficiently high to dissuade them from obtaining it. Interestingly, the Report pointed out that these states account for nearly half of the electoral votes that will be needed to gain election to the Presidency this fall (125) and the constituencies affected by the new laws are seen as more likely to vote Democratic than Republican

when they do cast ballots.³ The Project's report concluded the onerous new requirements and the difficulties of ensuring necessary documentation among the roughly 5 million affected citizens would indeed depress voter turnout among the groups and could, in a close presidential election race, affect its outcome. All of the states that have taken these actions have GOP controlled legislatures and all justified their initiatives on the grounds that such efforts would deter voter fraud.⁴ While this appeal to fear and malfeasance may hold some emotional attraction, in fact, there is no empirical evidence that the American electoral system suffers from widespread fraud, and certainly not disproportionately among the groups that practically are most affected by the new voter identification requirements in these states.

It is difficult to review such evidence and not conclude, as *The Times* did, that the Republican Party has decided as a part of a systematic political strategy not only to reduce sharply and, when possible, abandon support for the poor and impaired, but also to take steps to make it yet more difficult for these groups, already the target of broad social discrimination and opprobrium, to participate in the political process. The cynic might suggest that GOP officials have come to believe that these socially vulnerable groups are less likely on average to vote for their candidates anyway and so it is expedient both to depress their engagement and also to reshape government roles by simply denying them public support on the grounds of fiscal necessity. If this is so, it is indeed deeply cynical or worse.

For their part, GOP governors have offered an array of public arguments for their decisions to curtail or deny support to the poor. Two in particular stand out as both inflammatory and revelatory: Governor Perry has argued Medicaid expansion to help a share of his state's 6.3 million uninsured obtain health insurance represents an "incursion on his state's sovereignty" (states are, of course, not sovereign in the American political system), while in a recent campaign fundraising address in Vermont, Governor Paul LePage of Maine likened the nation's effort to help its poor and uninsured attain access to health care to the Gestapo's role in the Holocaust.⁵ Both are deeply radical (if not bizarre) claims that appear to rest on a view of society as a free-for-all in which those who prosper are considered morally superior to those who do not or cannot. In no event, apparently for these leaders, should Americans seek to help anyone in their midst on the basis of their shared standing as fellow citizens and their need, but instead to leave such citizens to their own

devices on grounds that if they cannot prosper, it must somehow be their own fault.

During the last century this nation and many others moved away from this deeply individualistic and callous posture toward the immiserated and impaired in its midst, for obvious reasons, not least assuring these individuals their human and civil rights. But at least one of our political parties now appears to be returning to this extreme “survival of the fittest” view of society. Whatever else may be said of this position, this perspective is not, as some GOP leaders have suggested, animated by the overall budgetary significance of such assistance, as many national and state expenditure categories are far larger than support for the poor and those with disabilities. Instead, again, it seems to rest finally on a view of society that would return the nation to a sense that it owes nothing to the poor or those with disabilities in its midst, and to blame those individuals for their situations as it does so. I cannot imagine a surer recipe for social discord and fragmentation as well as deepening citizen alienation and disunity in the long-term than this course. It is more than sad to watch elected officials not only undo any ethical commitment to the less fortunate in their constituencies, but to do so with a false moral smugness and apparent callous indifference (and in LePage’s case do so via a morally abominable declaration). For these leaders, this is not a debate about what Americans owe each other or how most effectively to provide such support, but apparently whether U.S. citizens owe anyone, beside themselves, anything in society. To the extent it is fully realized, this vision is finally a recipe for social disintegration and widespread alienation and hopelessness. Since our democracy rests only on our collective belief in our institutions and in the sinews that bind us voluntarily one to another, full embrace of this turn could only be deeply injurious, if not fatal, to our nation’s capacity for self-governance in the long run.

(Originally published July 23, 2012)

Notes

¹ New York Times Editorial Board. 2012. “The Rush to Abandon the Poor,” *The New York Times*, July 18. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/18/opinion/the-rush-to-abandon-the-poor.html>.

² Gaskins, Keesha, and Sundeep Iyer. 2012. “The Challenge of Obtaining Voter Identification,” The Brennan Center for Justice, New York University School of Law. Available at: <https://www.brennancenter.org/publication/>

[challenge-obtaining-voter-identification.](#)

³ Gaskins and Iver, “The Challenge of Obtaining Voter Identification.”

⁴ Gaskins and Iver, “The Challenge of Obtaining Voter Identification.”

⁵ LePage, Paul. 2012. Weekly Message, July 7. Office of Governor Paul R.

LePage (website). Available at: [https://www.maine.gov/governor/lepage/newsroom/single-address.html?id=409717.](https://www.maine.gov/governor/lepage/newsroom/single-address.html?id=409717)

20 Policy-makers, Policy-making and the ‘American Dream’

Current Republican Party presidential nominee Mitt Romney’s comments, made at a private fundraiser in Florida in May and recently released on video by *Mother Jones* magazine, declaring roughly half of Americans believed themselves “entitled” to government handouts and were dependent on them and therefore unlikely to vote for him, are by now well-known.¹ The former governor has rightly been criticized roundly for his stance, which was and is both untrue and pernicious for democratic self-governance. I do not intend to repeat or expand on such criticisms here. Rather, using recent comments offered by Naomi Wolf of *The Guardian* and U.S. Senator James Webb of Virginia, I want to reflect on what Romney’s beliefs suggest about policy-making and the American Dream.

For her part, the ever-thought-provoking Wolf has suggested that the former governor’s observations indicate that the American Dream is dead and that his remarks constitute a declaration of class war in the United States on the part of the nation’s “Haves,” who blame its “Have-Nots” for that passing. As she noted in her September 12 column in *The Guardian*:

What Romney’s remarks show is that the wealthy are handling the corruption of a system that benefits them by assigning blame for the destruction of the American Dream to the have-nots. In the Reagan years, only ‘welfare queens’ and the small percentage of people actually on food stamps were targeted as drains on the system – needing ‘government handouts’ and failing to ‘take responsibility for their lives.’ Now, as Romney admits, the wealthy deem virtually half the voting public as irredeemably shiftless moochers. ... We thus see a turning-point in American conservative philosophy. This was the moment when the wealthy elite stopped believing its own PR, the self-affirming myth of that economic success can always be had for those who want it and are willing to work. Mitt Romney has told us that it’s now simply class war: a struggle to stop the other half getting what ‘we’ have.²

Senator Webb, meanwhile, a strongly independent and even cantankerous legislator, who had remained aloof from the current presidential campaign until he chose to introduce and strongly endorse President Barack Obama for reelection at a campaign event in Virginia Beach, Virginia, on September 27, also raised the issue of the American Dream in his remarks:

We all want the American dream—unending opportunity at the top if you put things together and you make it, fairness along the way, and a safety net underneath you if you fall on hard times or suffer disability or as you reach your retirement years. That's the American Trifecta—opportunity, fairness, and security. It's why people from all over the world do whatever they can to come here. ... This is not the time to turn over the helm of the ship of state to someone whose views on foreign policy seem awkward and uninformed, whose economic policies favor those who are already advantaged, and who does not seem to understand that many of those who need government assistance today want to live the American dream just as much as those who have already made it. That they don't think of themselves as part of a culture of dependency, but maybe need a little help here and there so that they might say they are living in a land of opportunity.³

These comments offer two alternative explorations of the implications of Romney's stance, which favors still greater inequality in society and the removal of much public assistance for those requiring it, for the traditional American vision of opportunity. Wolf sees the GOP, by allying itself with the most ideological and libertarian of its number, as having embraced and launched an effort to enshrine a new sort of economic aristocracy in the United States that believes itself entitled to its standing by virtue of its wealth, which its members believe represents a sign of its supposed moral superiority. While Webb shares her concern, he did not declare the American Dream dead, but instead endangered, and he warned his audience that policy choices have helped to create the challenges the nation now confronts.

The list of important policy decisions one might cite to buttress Webb's argument is long: The United States elected in the last decade or so to enter into two wars that have cost the nation dearly in blood and treasure (Iraq and Afghanistan) and which appear to be resulting in ambiguous gains at best. At the urging of President George W. Bush, Congress chose to reduce

taxes significantly and disproportionately for its most wealthy, but not to curtail its expenditures similarly, resulting in a continuing and very large structural budgetary deficit. The Congress chose to deregulate in substantial measure the nation's banks and their undue risk-taking played a critical role in unleashing a near-Depression from which America is only slowly recovering. And finally, U.S. political leaders have chosen effectively to allow the nation's essential public infrastructure to continue to decay, endangering the country's long-term economic vitality and viability.

Much more might be said of the significance of past political choices to the nation's current economic and social situation, but it is not necessary to belabor the point here. As we enter the last weeks of a particularly divisive and rancorous presidential campaign, it appears prudent to stop and note that while one may point rightly to the ongoing importance of globalization and of fierce economic competition as contributing to a share of the nation's challenges, a strong percentage of those trials were (and remain) of its leaders' own devising. They also are of the population's construction to the extent voters supported those decisions and the politicians who made them. Policy choices do matter, sometimes elementally, and elections are important too because they provide the popular legitimacy for would-be leaders to make those decisions. However one interprets the competing views highlighted here concerning the once and future status of the American Dream, those perspectives underscore the accuracy of the too often-derided observation, "elections matter." They do. The current contest and the controversy and outrage concerning Mr. Romney's unguarded comments and their portent for social and economic opportunity for all Americans highlight that reality afresh, if any reminder were needed.

(Originally published September 30, 2012)

Notes

¹ Corn, David. 2012. "Secret Video: Romney Tells Millionaire Donors What He Really Thinks of Obama Voters," *Mother Jones*, September 17. Available at: <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/09/secret-video-romney-private-fundraiser/>.

² Wolf, Naomi. 2012. "How the Mitt Romney Video Killed the American Dream." *The Guardian*, September 12. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/sep/21/mitt-romney-video-killed-american-dream>.

³ Webb, James. "On Givers and Takers," Speeches by James Webb (website),

September 27. Available at: <http://www.jameswebb.com/speeches-by-jim/webb-renews-call-for-economic-fairness-veterans>.

21 Voting Access Restrictions: Democracy in Choppy Waters

Like many Americans, I have followed with interest the fate of the 11 restrictive voter identification and ballot access laws recently passed by GOP majority state legislatures despite overwhelming Democratic Party opposition. Opinion polls consistently suggest a majority of U.S. citizens favor such identification requirements, despite the near complete dearth of evidence of fraud that has been used to justify their passage. Nonetheless, the courts have recently not been kind to these laws and several have been enjoined or partially or completely set-aside and will not prevent individuals from voting in the upcoming election. Severely restrictive identification statutes do remain in effect in four states, but none of those are expected to affect the coming presidential election outcome.

As I have written before, many analysts have suggested that those pressing for these statutes were under no illusions that fraud was a significant issue in U.S. elections, but instead undertook these steps for the possible electoral advantage they might provide. That is, the laws were passed to accord a perceived strategic electoral advantage to their sponsoring party, and for no other reason. I have noted, too, that to the extent this is so, it represents a particularly sad turn in our politics because it suggests that a significant share of the nation's elected leaders are now willing to take whatever steps might be helpful to secure their hold on power, irrespective of their implications for freedom or self-governance. This willingness has at least three very significant ramifications.

First, and most obvious, if these efforts are indeed a naked ruse aimed at misleading citizens by suggesting they are addressing a real need as they effectively deny thousands of people (disproportionately minorities, those with disabilities, the poor and seniors) their right to vote, they abridge a central right of those citizens prevented from voting thereby. That is, if these laws deliberately target groups of voters in an attempt to ensure they do not or cannot exercise their franchise, not only do they undermine the rights of those so marked, but they have been pressed to passage in a way so as to manipulate successfully and knowingly a majority of Americans into believing that there was a legitimate problem to be addressed by such actions in the first instance. The first of these implications is obviously

inimical to a vital right of self-governance for many Americans, while the second and deeply cynical consequence undoes democracy in a different way by swaying apparently uninformed voters by means of a believable fabrication. Both of these results severely undermine governance by and for the people.

Second, to the extent the Republican Party's ongoing campaign to place restrictions on ballot access represents a turn in that Party's leadership to an undisciplined quest for power, irrespective of its democratic costs, the implications of the current efforts to restrict entry to the franchise could be profound for the social sinews that bind the polity. That is, if one or both major parties come to believe they can effectively deny the vote to a share of the eligible population who, in their view, do not support them sufficiently and gain the assent of a majority to do so by misleading them deliberately, we will have already slipped into a deeply treacherous situation in which some are permitted freedoms while others are not, as electoral needs appear to dictate. In this scenario little would bind leaders to those they nominally serve. There increasingly are few obstacles to prevent such usurpation and the road to still more robust adoption of such "successful tactics" will doubtless prove easier with every perceived Party "win." That is, with each success it may be easier to deny "those people" and that "other" their rights, on no other grounds ultimately than that it appears electorally auspicious to do so.

Finally, I find myself wondering just how it is that those pressing for these laws rationalize them to themselves, assuming they know full well what their repercussions will be for those targeted. While they are perhaps subtler and are justified differently, how do these actions differ in their essentials from the repugnant Jim Crow ballot requirements aimed at denying African-Americans their right to vote for so long? How do legislators justify to themselves voting for laws they know will de facto deny the right to vote of many citizens they are sworn to represent?

Our Republic's institutions do not exist to permit one or the other party to reward its partisans by devising clever ways to deny others their voting rights or freedom. Nor do we elect lawmakers to employ rhetoric deliberately cast to deceive so as to attain or to wield power. Both of these dangers now seem clearly in view and it also seems self-evident they are unlikely to be checked except by the courts in the near term and, more importantly and sustainably, by the people themselves. Unfortunately, I do not now see that the broader citizenry is even aware of the implications of

this inclination among many of their partisan leaders, let alone prepared to take action to demand its redress. In this sense, American self-governance now confronts a deep and largely unacknowledged challenge that threatens to erode its very foundations. Sadly, if this is so, the U.S. citizenry does not yet appear anything other than quiescent as its capacities for self-governance are hollowed out.

(Originally published October 8, 2012)

22 On American Unity and Individualism

A column, a speech and a film have caused me to reflect during these post-election days. First, David Brooks, writing in *The New York Times* following the election, has enjoined the Republican Party to abandon its unsuccessful single-minded argument that enshrines individualism and contends that government is the single most significant force in America that prevents individuals from succeeding. As he succinctly put it, in this view: “Growing beyond proper limits, government saps initiative, sucks resources, breeds a sense of entitlement and imposes a stifling uniformity on the diverse webs of local activity.”¹

While Brooks contended there is innately nothing wrong with this argument, it does not resonate with the nation’s emerging demographic and therefore, he suggested, should be abandoned in favor of a perspective that celebrates work and a government that does all it can to support the productive lives of its citizens. For Brooks, the GOP’s survival demands a change in course in tactics, if not in principle.

While I certainly agree there is nothing wrong with celebrating work and the can-do American spirit, I am not so sure as Brooks that this mantra was not taken too far in the 2012 campaign, and in recent decades in the GOP more generally. Romney’s infamous “47 percent dependency” remarks,² the willingness of the party to blame the federal government, immigrants and minorities for a major share of the nation’s challenges, with the implication that the first is utterly incompetent and unproductive while too many of the latter are “welfare dependents” and stereotypically lazy, goes far beyond a clarion call to rugged individualism. Indeed, what concerns me is that the banner so stridently taken up in the late campaign particularly, was in principle deeply corrosive of the ties that unite Americans. And it is only those bonds that join the nation as nation. Americans can and should debate which level of government ought to do what and whether certain responsibilities ought to be the province of government and how public services might most effectively and equitably be delivered. But these are quite obviously different questions than asserting that only some citizens are productive while others are dependent slackers, that taxes or regulation per se constitute illegitimate actions or the implication that only some among

us are deserving of full citizenship. And it is also worth highlighting once more that the GOP has generally tied these claims to calls for the market to take a far larger role in the nation's political economy. The implicit, and often explicit, claim accompanying these assertions is that the market can substitute for democratic self-governance in the organization of the nation's political economy.

Given these contentions, I was struck secondly that President Barack Obama chose to call for American unity in his victory speech early Wednesday morning.³ This was not merely a tactical call to rally individuals around his likely next policy steps, but a ringing declaration in Lincolnesque tones that the American citizenry constitutes a single nation and that the population's differences should never obscure that underlying reality. Likewise, the President did not argue that this or that group was responsible for the nation's challenges or aver that the market could take the place of the difficult and tough negotiations that attend to democratic self-governance in a heterogeneous society. He did not contend that only some were sufficiently "productive" to be included in that conversation, but again and again reminded his listeners that self-governance demands disciplined self-reflection and a willingness to include all Americans in such efforts with the aim of identifying just action and common ground. I was struck again that there is no alternative to such efforts if we wish to remain a united and free people. Making metaphoric democratic "sausage" is not always pretty, but unless we begin from the premise that we are one nation and our national government represents both the symbol and only legitimate instrument of that unity as we address our shared concerns, we will not long enjoy the privilege, messy or not.

So, finally, it has been interesting to read about the release of Steven Spielberg's new film, "Lincoln," which is already being touted as a potential Oscar nominee.⁴ The film treats the President's final period in office and highlights Lincoln's struggles to create one nation in the midst of a terrible war and grievous social and political divisions in the country. It seems to me the timing of this film is serendipitous, as much can be learned for our time from the president many regard as America's finest ever. First, Lincoln never flinched from his abiding belief in the nation as a unity, nor his determination to assure self-governance for its people. That is, he never sought alternatives or scapegoats for the hard work of democracy. Second, Lincoln always displayed a keen sense of humor, humility and self-awareness that might serve as useful guideposts for our current leaders as they enter

into important discussions concerning significant choices for our nation's future. Finally, and recalling that much else might be said, it seems to me Lincoln demonstrated a steady determination on behalf of the commonweal that should stand as a shining reminder for our elected officials today. Their promise and their challenge rest in serving the American people and not one segment or group or individual of the same. They should do so acknowledging the fragility as well as enormous reservoir of strength that inhere in the regime and the people it serves. They owe that nation in all of its vital heterogeneity, frailty, vigor and dynamism their very best efforts.

(Originally published November 11, 2012)

Notes

¹ Brooks, David. 2012. "The Party of Work," *The New York Times*, November 9. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/opinion/brooks-the-party-of-work.html>

² Corn, David. 2012. "Secret Video: Romney tells millionaire donors what he really thinks of Obama voters," *Mother Jones*, September 17. Available at: <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/09/secret-video-romney-private-fundraiser/>.

³ Obama, Barack. 2012. "Audio and Transcript of Obama's Victory Speech," *National Public Radio*, November 7. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2012/11/06/164540079/transcript-president-obamas-victory-speech>.

⁴ "Lincoln." 2012. Steven Spielberg, Director and Producer. Dreamworks Pictures; 20th Century Fox.

23 On the ‘Idea of the Nation’

While a graduate student, I worked at my alma mater’s White Burkett Miller Center of Public Affairs and was privileged to meet and spend several days with the eminent Harvard University political scientist Samuel Beer when he participated in a symposium there. Beer was an expert on British politics and political theory, and even then was a courtly gentleman who had technically just retired from Harvard University following a long and distinguished career; he moved on to teach part-time at Dartmouth College and later, at Boston College. He was 97 when he died in 2009.

When I had an opportunity to spend time with him, Beer was then beginning to embark on an inquiry into U.S. federalism that would result in his magisterial *To Make A Nation: The Rediscovery of American Federalism*, published by Harvard in 1993, a volume many scholars regard as his magnum opus as well as one of the finest books written on American federalism to date.¹ Beer had been concerned by President Ronald Reagan’s arguments that the states were sovereign in America’s regime and that a nationalist must be a centralizer. Beer argued forcefully when I met him that Reagan’s thesis fit neither American history and constitutional design nor the evolution or practice of the nation’s institutions. He presented his critique of Reagan’s position in *To Make A Nation*. For all of the subtlety of that text’s historical and political argument, the book demonstrated afresh that America was conceived and created as a nation and that the people collectively, and not the states, exercise sovereignty within it and they should embrace rather than fear that responsibility.

Nonetheless, while Reagan was wrong historically and empirically, his notion that there is something inherently centralizing about recognizing the primacy of the collective will of the people through its instrument, the national government, remains very much a part of our political dialogue today, particularly for many current GOP supporters. I was reminded of this while reading David Brooks’ column in *The New York Times* the day after President Barack Obama’s second inaugural address, in which Brooks declared the president’s speech one of the finest of such efforts in American history, but decried its emphasis on the nation as naturally centralizing.² Brooks is hardly a shrill ideologue, and yet he, too, appears to imagine that

Reagan was correct, at least in his emphasis on national action as always leading to centralization.

The problem with Brooks' assumption, as Beer pointed out when examining Reagan's claims, is that when the American government undertakes responsibilities it rarely does so by creating large national bureaucracies to implement them. Instead, because ours is a federal polity, the nation typically works through the 50 states and as often, thousands of localities, and tolerates the frequently huge discrepancies that result in policy and program outcome as a result of differing state and local government capacities and politics in the name of honoring its populations' diverse needs. And, ironically, with the ascendance of neoliberalism in recent decades, pressed in no small measure by the Republican Party, that tendency has been expanded to include complex partnerships for national service delivery not only through states and localities, but also in tandem with nonprofit and for-profit organizations. In short, the idea that because the national government is involved in an activity, it is somehow centralized thereby does not meet any empirical test of how the federal government actually delivers the bulk of its services, or for that matter, has *ever* delivered its programs.

But even more problematically, as Beer might note, the sort of assumption Brooks, and before him Reagan, made is tied too often for too many to a misguided assault on the idea of the nation itself. The United States is not governed by its states, though these are vital to the regime and serve as one important service provider and bulwark against the emergence of tyranny within it. Instead, the people collectively ultimately govern the nation and constitute its only sovereign. The nation is their paramount instrument of will and action. In lieu, however, of seizing this insight and realizing its portent, Brooks, like many before him, appears to imagine that the nation is somehow an "other." It is not. It is, rather, the only and supreme instrument of the sovereign people who should not seek for other non-existent means to replace it while de-legitimizing the nation in the process by dubbing its actions centralizing or worse.

President Obama vigorously heralded the idea of the nation in his second inaugural address, as have many American statesmen before him: George Washington, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt and many more. None of these leaders imagined that the people had to choose amongst the levels of governance they had created in their federal regime, or between their

sovereignty and that of a mythical marketplace, convinced somehow that the market was more politically legitimate than their own standing. Rather, these leaders understood deeply that the nation was all that bound so diverse a people together. President Obama seems to understand that fact profoundly as well and he chose to remind Americans of that bedrock characteristic of their polity in his address. Far from calling for a centralized state or for the much dreaded and mythical “socialism” feared by the most strident of the Republican Party faithful today, President Obama was deeply within a quintessentially American tradition and well within the Constitutional structure envisioned by the Founders in his remarks. It is a pity, indeed, to see that misunderstood by even thoughtful opinion leaders in this time of fear and deep polarization.

Samuel Beer was right: There is no substitute for the people’s willingness to accept responsibility for their governance in our polity and this they must do to address the challenges now confronting them. Seeking to avoid their own accountability and blame their only shared governance instrument—the federal government—for their current pass while continuing to search for additional scapegoats will do little but undermine the regime whose foundation they constitute.

(Originally published January 28, 2013)

Notes

¹ Beer, Samuel. 1993. *To Make A Nation: The Rediscovery of American Federalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

² Brook, David. 2013. “The Collective Turn,” *The New York Times*, January 23. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/22/opinion/brooks-the-collective-turn.html>.

24 Undermining Democratic Self-Governance via Ideological Absolutism

Like many of his counterparts in the so-called “chatter class” on television, in newspapers and magazines and on radio, David Brooks of *The New York Times*, in a column this past week, made three basic points concerning sequestration, the latest crisis du jour of American governance:

- It revolves around continuing and competing claims of our two political parties for smaller government, on the one hand (the GOP), and assured social services provision (the Democrats), on the other hand
- The ongoing series of governance crises the nation is undergoing are the responsibility of both of its political parties, and
- President Barack Obama can and should “change this partisan conversation,” but has failed to do so, representing a continuing “failure” on his part. Indeed, Brooks helpfully offered a number of policy proposals he suggested would do the trick if the President would but listen.¹

I want here to argue that each of these points obscures more than it reveals and that, in any case, Brooks and his peers either fail to understand or refuse to acknowledge and criticize the radical ideology now prevailing in the Republican Party concerning governance. The GOP partisans responsible for the current governance debacle neither wish to govern in any traditional understanding of that term, nor, taking their claims at face value, care very deeply about the continuing legitimacy of the institutions they have sworn to protect and serve. I will briefly address each of these concerns.

First, it should be apparent to Brooks, normally a clear-eyed observer, that the Tea Party caucus now regnant in the House GOP despite its relatively small number is uninterested in governance. That group is not fighting for smaller government or a government differently organized. The Tea Party caucus instead represents the logical culmination of more than three decades of GOP efforts to attack not only specific public initiatives at all scales, but also the very idea of the legitimacy of popular government itself.

Adherents of this ideology have condemned all manner of public action as per se illegitimate, including virtually any regulation of market institutions or property, taxation itself or efforts to address the nation's rapidly crumbling infrastructure. These ideologues, for radical ideologues they are, have meanwhile routinely de facto argued that markets should displace the representative of the popular sovereign as society's principal organizing form. But markets are neither democratically representative, nor legitimate nor organized to govern, so however superficially alluring, the claim is empty as stated. It also deliberately and profoundly misleads the citizens at whom it is directed and is, in consequence, morally repugnant. Our recurring governance crises are not occurring because some GOP House members want to argue for limited government, but because these have shown themselves willing to risk the public weal and nation's standing to gain their partisan aims rather than negotiate or compromise with others who do not share their perspective or zeal.

Second, whatever criticisms one might offer of the Democratic Party, and like others I could offer my share, those partisans in Congress were not responsible for engineering a needless and artificial "crisis" concerning the nation's debt ceiling that resulted in a reduction in the country's credit rating, did not create the so-called "fiscal cliff" fiasco and are not responsible for the GOP's choice not to bargain currently to redress the present sequestration failure. These choices collectively represent a shameful miscarriage of constitutional responsibility. Contrary to Brooks' and other commentators' contentions, our recurring governance crises are not the product of bi-partisan failure, but of the ideology-driven choices of one party's extremists. The consequences of their actions now loom large for our polity, from risking its credit standing to demands for errant fiscal policies (large reductions in expenditures in the face of ongoing economic weakness) on purely ideological grounds to continuing efforts to ensure that enacted laws that do not meet an ideological litmus test go unimplemented.

Finally, contrary to Brooks' claims, it seems clear that neither the President nor the House's own leadership can control the GOP caucus in its persistent efforts to attack the legitimacy of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid in addition to other major federal programs, even though each of these is supported by the majority of the American people. Given this reality, House Republican partisans have been arguing, using the present debt and deficit scenario as a cudgel, that our nation's financial circumstances now require eliminating or profoundly rethinking these programs. But neither the

country's current accounts deficit nor its debt situation is the product of these initiatives. So to argue is to mislead knowingly to gain one's policy preferences when these are not otherwise supported by a majority of the voting population. Overall then, given the ideological ardor and absolutism of the GOP House caucus and its members' ongoing knee-jerk efforts to block, on partisan grounds, virtually every presidential initiative brought before them, I find it difficult to contend that the current governance mess could magically be addressed by stronger leadership by President Obama, whatever the mix of policy proposals he might offer. The present situation is not the fault of the President failing to do this or that, but of one party and its partisans being absolutely unwilling to compromise to ensure more effective governance.

Our current continuing series of governance crises are not necessary. Let me be very clear: These scenarios are not the result of classic partisan conflict or posturing. They are instead the result of one party's members' failure to address their constitutional responsibilities. Sadly, there is no easy redress for this pass, as I have argued in previous columns. One may only hope, and it is hope against hope I fear, that enough Americans will demand change that those responsible for this shameful and increasingly dangerous situation will begin to behave with at least a modicum of prudence and deliberation.

(Originally published March 4, 2013)

Notes

¹ Brooks, David. 2013. "Our Second Adolescence," *The New York Times*, February 25. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/opinion/brooks-our-second-adolescence.html>.

25 When Turnabout is not Fair Play

The pace at which the post-2012 Presidential election Republican Party is jettisoning previously adopted positions is little short of jarring. Several prominent Party leaders recently embraced same-sex marriage by joining an amicus brief concerning the issue for the Supreme Court and many have undertaken an about-face on immigration policy as well. Meanwhile, several GOP governors have now elected to accept the previously much maligned “Obamacare” expansion of Medicaid in their states. Observers and party faithful alike are seeking to make sense of these shifts. They represent sharp changes following a national campaign that often slandered immigrants and same-sex marriage and labeled increased access to health care for the nation’s uninsured millions an in-principle and abominable deprivation of personal liberty. When asked recently why these large and sudden changes were occurring in major GOP positions long dear to elements of that party’s base, Senator John McCain (R. Arizona) said, “An election happened.”

The veteran lawmaker’s comment reminded us that parties ultimately exist principally as vehicles for garnering power and the Republican Party is currently smarting from its fourth electoral loss in the last six national elections. As such, its leaders are evaluating all of its adopted stands in light of positioning the party to garner more votes in the future from those groups in society with which it did not fare well last November. And GOP leaders are doing so recognizing that those voting blocs will soon make up the majority of the electoral population.

While one might wonder whether this change of heart is genuine since it constitutes so sudden a turn from stridently harsh and shrill rhetoric in favor of contrary positions, and many commentators have done so, I want to raise two different questions concerning these abrupt shifts. First, I find myself musing on the power politics implications of these positions vis-à-vis the communities the party has suddenly abandoned and what that may mean for the GOP going forward. And second, I am struck that despite the internal dissensus so evident among Republicans today, the party’s leaders appear to believe that they can maintain a base constituency around calls for reduced government expenditure, especially that associated with programs for the poor and vulnerable in society. This stance will likely lead to still more

hardship for the nation's marginalized citizens at a time of already pervasive inequality and high poverty rates in our nation.

Were I a social conservative who believed deeply that homosexuality violated my understanding of God's will and should in no instance be tolerated in law or public policy, let alone sanctified through marriage, I would be nonplussed by the GOP's sudden abandonment of my position, having been assured only months ago not only of my righteousness, but of the Party's strong support for my stance. I would nonetheless find myself today literally thrown under the wheels of the oncoming bus by Party representatives arguing a completely opposed position. I am not surprised that many social conservatives are angry and embittered by this shift. GOP leaders meanwhile hope this group can be mollified by the Party's continued hard-line stand against abortion and "out of control" government spending. Those same leaders appear perhaps cynically confident, too, that however angry this faction of the Party base may be at its apparent betrayal, its members are unlikely to shift loyalties. The same logic follows for those supporting the Party who are deeply concerned about immigration. GOP leaders seem set to embark on much needed reform, but most are seeking to placate supporters by suggesting they either will not permit or will require onerous conditions for "illegals" to attain citizenship. Nonetheless, the Party's change of position has been swift and far-reaching.

If Republican leaders seem to believe that the GOP can shift some of its positions with near impunity, they also now appear more wedded than ever to a gospel of national expenditure reduction, even in the face of the dangers such action poses for the nation's weak economy and its portent for the vulnerable populations it will affect. Whether this choice is cynical and small, a means by which to soothe disaffected elements of the Party's base, the only practicable ideological recourse for the Party given the beliefs of its supporters, or some combination of all of these tendencies (and perhaps others) at once, is debatable.

The current sequestration, a product of GOP ideologically framed insistence that this meat-ax approach to expenditure reduction was essential to combat federal deficit spending, will have the following known effects for the nation's vulnerable according to a recent cataloging by Robert Reich:

Some \$1.9 billion in low-income rental subsidies are being eliminated, affecting 125,000 people. Cuts to the Department of Agriculture will

eliminate rental assistance for another 10,000 low-income rural people. Meanwhile, 100,000 formerly homeless Americans are likely to be removed from their current emergency shelters. More than 3.8 million Americans receiving long-term unemployment benefits will have their monthly payments reduced by as much as 9.4 percent and lose an average of \$400 in benefits over their period of joblessness. The Department of Education's Title I program, which helps schools serving more than a million disadvantaged students, will be cut \$715 million, and \$400 million will be cut from Head Start, the preschool program for poor children. And major cuts will be made in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, which provides nutrition assistance and education.¹

These reductions come on the heels of the nation's long-lived and brutalizing recession and continued high rates of unemployment. They also strongly risk extending the period of the nation's economic weakness even as they result in significant job losses. Most economists argue these effects will occur because these cuts are not now appropriate in so weak a national economy. But the Party is forging ahead with this course because that action appeals to the many voters in its base who believe government is society's most pressing problem and that many, if not most, of its expenditures are neither legitimate nor appropriate. *The New York Times* reports that GOP leaders trust that ensuring sharp expenditure reductions, whatever their portent for the poor and for vulnerable citizens and for the economy, will help to unify the Party's various factions as it otherwise seeks to reposition itself.² In this view, attaining some modicum of Party electoral unity apparently is worth the price it imposes on the already poor, vulnerable and marginalized populations and the economic risk it brings. In any case, GOP leaders may be content in knowing that these costs will be borne by groups unpopular with its base, or they can be blamed on other actors should they adversely affect the economy as widely predicted.

It is difficult to know what to say about this situation except to suggest the obvious. It in no sense can be said to be an exercise in democratic governance. It is instead an ideologically framed exercise, apparently undertaken simply, and some might say cynically, to appeal to elements of the Party's base to maintain some semblance of unity to help the GOP's chances of securing increased power, whatever the costs to the nation generally and to the vulnerable within it, more specifically. That price now

looks set to be significant and imposing it for such reasons is simply unacceptable by any democratic calculus.

(Originally published March 11, 2013)

Notes

¹ Reich, Robert. 2013. "Bull Market for Stocks; Bear Market for Workers," *The American Prospect*, March 6. Available at: <http://prospect.org/article/bull-market-stocks-bear-market-workers>.

² Stevenson, Richard. 2013. "G.O.P. Clings to One Thing It Agrees On," *The New York Times*, March 3. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/04/us/politics/gop-lacking-unity-clings-to-budget-goals.html>.

26 Through a Glass Darkly or Weighing the Price of a Partisan Mobilization at any Cost

The New York Times reported on May 17 that several issues now confronting the Obama presidency have “energized” the recently factionalized and demoralized GOP base. These include the supposed partisan and autocratic Internal Revenue Service action to review closely a number of Tea Party chapter tax status applications, the alleged “cover-up” of an assumed illicit action in the Benghazi tragedy and the Justice Department’s obtaining of the phone records of a number of AP journalists in an attempt to uncover and stop what the Department considered a significant national security breach. In response to these events, the nation has witnessed the following and more on the part of the Republican Party and its allies:

Former Vice President Dick Cheney has appeared on national television to assert (while presenting no evidence for his claim) that the President is lying concerning Benghazi and there is in fact a “smoking gun” in this sad story and it is being hidden by the President personally.¹

Rep. Michele Bachmann (R, MN) has offered the following observation, again completely without evidence, “As I have been home in my district in the Sixth District of Minnesota, there isn’t a weekend that hasn’t gone by that someone says to me: ‘Michele, what in the world are you all waiting for in Congress? Why aren’t you impeaching the president? He’s been making unconstitutional actions since he came into office.’”²

Former Arkansas governor and conservative entertainment talk show host Mike Huckabee has likewise called for the President’s impeachment.³

Republican officeholders and activists are arguing that the President is “obviously” misleading the American people and therefore unfit to hold his post, and the national government generally is just as illegitimate, because it is overreaching and tyrannical.

Cynicism and ideological pretentiousness aside, the former Vice President offered no evidence of anything resembling a scandal occurring in Benghazi, nor did the recent House Foreign Affairs committee hearings concerning those events. Likewise, there is no indication of anything approximating an impeachable offense in any of the three episodes noted. Indeed, to date, the IRS scandal looks more like the product of technocratic confusion and perhaps ineptitude related to applications for tax-exempt status as 504(c)4 organizations than anything else. No substantiation to date has suggested Benghazi was anything other than the tragedy it surely was. And while the Justice Department's actions in seizing AP phone records are troubling, untoward and deeply unfortunate, they were not undertaken without a genuine and debatable concern animating them. In short, to the extent the critical comments noted above can be explained, they appear to be linked to an effort to energize the Party's base to mobilize its members electorally against such policy and program actions as the President might propose. They are so wildly inflammatory and so utterly unrelated to reality that it is difficult to make sense of these assertions as anything but cynical posturing.

Meanwhile, also this week, *The Times* reported that a large national survey of economists had found a solid consensus that the nation's sequestration and allied efforts to cut its "unaffordable" deficit and debt, embraced by the lion's share of GOP leaders and activists, were in fact misguided and were slowing the country's recovery from its long-lived recession (and thereby actively harming millions of citizens, rich, middle income and impoverished alike). Nevertheless, as the sequestration and cuts progress, Republican Party leaders are demanding still deeper reductions in federal expenditures to rein in a purportedly unsustainable national government. But in complete empirical contradiction to GOP claims, the Congressional Budget Office reported this week a very significant reduction in its projected deficit for the nation, the product largely of the economic growth that has recently occurred. Nonetheless, Republican leaders and activists have ignored this fact in favor of a continued call for sharp cutbacks in national expenditures, using the deficit as rationale and cudgel.

The Stanford University Center on Poverty and Inequality (CPI) offered another example this past week of the likely effects of continued GOP fiscal policies emphasizing public program and expenditure reductions.⁴ The CPI reported on May 14 that poverty and inequality had increased in most communities in the recent recession, but this trend was not evenly distributed. Not surprisingly perhaps, minorities and recent immigrants lived

in those neighborhoods with the largest increases in unemployment and inequality. The shift was so large that the Center predicted that, barring effective policy steps to ameliorate it, it will result in a continued and deepening divide between have and have-not communities across the nation for decades to come. Meanwhile, the Republican Party has targeted for sharp reductions or elimination in its federal budget plan many of the programs that assist such population groups. The conservatives call such efforts undue deprivations of the liberty of those populations, but Republican leaders never discuss the character of freedom enjoyed by individuals who live lives of profound poverty and food insecurity.

One final example of GOP-style politics in our capital today is particularly telling. Republican leaders continue to refuse to confirm the appointment of proposed leaders to head federal programs they do not favor ideologically. They also have acted often to reduce appropriations for agencies they find odious including, ironically, the Internal Revenue Service whose budget has been reduced 17 percent since 2002. The result is less than adequate performance by these entities in many cases, and for obvious reasons. The steps taken ensure the result, which is then used to pillory the public victim. The *Times* reports, for example, the Party plans to use any and all glitches in the implementation of the Affordable Care Act reforms, whose institutional leaders the GOP has refused to appoint, as a centerpiece of its campaign in 2014 to continue to tar that effort and ultimately obtain its repeal.⁵

What all of these examples illustrate is a party that has so lost its way in the name of power mongering or ideology, or both, as to encourage its leaders and mouthpieces to set aside facts in order to offer outrageous claims to inflame its base. In so doing, those same individuals are each day and with every misleading and demagogic assertion they offer, delegitimizing the government they are elected to serve and of which they are a part (or as supposed journalists or media figures, to cover thoughtfully), at least with those voters sufficiently credulous, pre-disposed or uninformed as to believe their claims. It would certainly be possible to debate a range of propositions concerning the warp and woof of political action in multiple domains without calling for the President's impeachment without evidence or assuming tyranny without facts to bolster that claim, but many elected GOP officials no longer appear willing to do so.

Instead, a strong share of the Party's leaders and media representatives are now, whether they realize it or not, attacking the very foundations of democratic governance by working assiduously to destroy its popular

legitimacy. I cannot explain this turn, nor can I understand why these individuals believe that, should they succeed, they could govern in such a scenario, were they to gain the power they have taken such steps to attain. In short, the current state of the nation's politics is not simply lamentable; it now constitutes a danger to self-governance itself. The present situation could be remedied, but only if those promoting it chose to discipline their claims and to harness them to facts, rather than ideological flights of fancy aimed at enraging a targeted population.

(Originally published May 20, 2013)

Notes

¹ Cirilli, Kevin. 2013. "Cheney on Benghazi: Lies, Cover up." *Politico*, May 14. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/05/huckabee-benghazi-will-drive-obama-from-office-090964>.

² Lavender, Paige. 2013. "Bachmann: Every Weekend People Tell Me They Want Obama Impeached (Video)." *The Huffington Post*, May 16. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/16/michele-bachmann-impeach-obama_n_3285464.html.

³ Weinger, Mackenzie. 2013. "Huckabee: Benghazi will Oust Obama." *Politico*, May 6. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/05/huckabee-benghazi-will-drive-obama-from-office-090964>.

⁴ Stanford University Center on Poverty and Inequality. 2013. *Recession Trends* (website), May 14. Available at: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/recessiontrends/cgi-bin/web/trend-data>.

⁵ Weisman, Jonathan and Jeremy Peters. 2013. "Republicans expand I.R.S. inquiry with eyes on the White House." *The New York Times*, May 17. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/18/us/politics/irs-scandal-congressional-hearings.html>.

27 When Bad Theory Leads to Poor Policy

The well-known American cultural disposition to “practical things” and the idea of “just getting the job done” has led to an ingrained suspicion of theory as somehow unimportant, if not useless. Many undergraduates arrive at university having been lectured by their parents to take “useful” courses and to avoid those classes that provide “only” philosophy or theory. Sadly, the same attitude is also common among many graduate students. And yet, despite this popular orientation or mythology, even a moment’s thought suggests that theories drive virtually everything in our world, from what we understand is befalling us each day and how we make sense of it, to what entrepreneurs believe will “sell” to whom and why in the marketplace, to how we regard our fellow citizens as we participate in self-governance processes. When these conceptions are wrong-headed, the consequences are typically severe and unforgiving. If an entrepreneur misjudges her market, her firm will fail. And if our elected leaders operate on faulty assumptions or theory as they make political choices on our collective behalf, the likelihood is strong that the policies that result will come freighted with heavy costs.

I was reminded of this truism, unacknowledged though it may be in our popular culture, by a recent column in *Commonweal* by William Pfaff.¹ Pfaff argued that our policy-makers had erred profoundly and often with major negative consequences in recent decades because their framing theories of how to make sense of world events were misguided or simply wrong. Among other examples of failed models, Pfaff cited the “Domino Theory” and Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” argument. The Domino Theory assumed Communist takeover of Southeast Asia and beyond if the United States did not intervene in the Vietnamese conflict. Lawmakers’ acceptance of that contention led to our involvement in Vietnam and that choice cost tens of thousands of lives and traumatized our nation in ways that continue to reverberate today.

Likewise, and more recently, the George W. Bush administration relied on Huntington’s thesis to argue that it was necessary to subdue militarily and that it was possible also thereby to “democratize,” the nations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Such was required, the Bush White House team argued, as each purportedly posed parlous and immediate threats to our nation in the

post-9/11 era. We are now more than a decade out from each intervention and neither nation can be said to have a sturdy democratic regime despite the loss of thousands of lives and the expenditure of more than \$3 trillion by the United States. The theory that America could impose democracy from the top-down militarily has proven spectacularly wrong, just as the Domino Theory was shown to be woefully wrong-headed decades prior.

Under Bush, the U.S. also launched a large and originally clandestine rendition and torture program aimed at combatting an unspecified, but ongoing “terrorist” threat. The results have been tragic for American moral standing in the world and also resulted in the quagmire that is symbolized by the prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, many of whose “inmates” are seeking to starve themselves to death out of hopelessness that their cases will receive appropriate judicial attention. While the costs to America’s standing are potentially very real for its troops when they are captured by hostile forces, who know full well the U.S. has tortured for its own purposes, this disastrous program, a clear violation of both international law and long-standing American policy, has yielded virtually nothing of positive value to the regime now mired in its consequences.

Our elected officials have indeed made many tragic choices in recent decades as a result of adopting ill-considered theories and that trend continues. Republican Senator Ted Cruz (Texas) and a few like-minded Tea Party-oriented colleagues are currently preventing Congress from any possibility of adopting a budget by disallowing appointment of a joint House-Senate conference committee to determine if such might be possible.² He takes this stance because, as he says, he does not trust his own party members to take the steps he believes necessary to reduce national expenditures and debt in the conference process. Were this scenario confronting a for-profit firm with which he was involved, Cruz would likely decry the profound inefficiency it represented and the unmanageable situation it would pose. But he and his colleagues have willfully imposed those conditions on the government he is elected to serve solely on the basis of an assumption about the possible future behavior of other Republican legislators not mirroring their preferences. That self-absorbed theory, such as it is, suffices for Cruz and a small group of fellow lawmakers to hold the nation hostage to a manifestly absurd scenario.

More broadly, I have earlier reported how a few senators prevented United States adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities late last year based on a widely discredited claim that it

would impair American sovereignty. In fact, ironically, the Convention's provisions were modeled on the long-standing Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, championed by President George H.W. Bush (R) and could have no such effect.

Another recent example of theory taking the guise of ideology-driven choice-making gone awry is the ongoing call by Republican legislators for deep reductions in government spending on the grounds of a ballooning deficit. They continue to clamor for fresh cuts in socially oriented expenditures particularly on this argument. Nonetheless, it does not accord with reality. The nation's deficit is declining, not growing, and despite a consensus among economists nationally that the fiscal course these legislators advocate will slow, if not endanger, the country's economic recovery, they are persisting in it. Obviously, the population writ large is bearing and will shoulder the costs of this zealous pursuit of an ill-advised theory of policy choice.

These examples point up three basic axioms of democratic politics. First, leaders' views matter. When our elected officials act on flawed or strident perspectives of the world, rather than on as judicious a perspective as can be obtained of the issues in play, the nation often comes the cropper. Second, simple-minded and self-regarding partisanship, compounded by dismissal of other views, can be positively pernicious for effective governance, as the Cruz example suggests. Finally, our nation appears to have made its worst mistakes when its leaders have allowed fear and ideologically rigid disposition to run roughshod over a more prudential evaluation of situations and alternatives from multiple stakeholder perspectives. Given these realities, our present course continues to suggest the likelihood of a governance process hobbled by misguided and misleading theorizing among some lawmakers who are also unwilling to countenance other views. The result is an ongoing scenario that is potentially poisonous, if not ruinous, for effective democratic decision-making.

(Originally published June 3, 2013)

Notes

¹ Pfaff, William. 2013. "This Time Is No Different: Half-Baked Theories Still Direct Global History," *Commonweal*, April 24. Available at: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/time-no-different>.

² Marlantes, Liz. 2013. "Republicans Talk up a Government Shutdown. Do They Mean It?" *Christian Science Monitor*, January 23. Available at:

[https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/Decoder/2013/0107/
Republicans-talk-up-a-government-shutdown.-Do-they-mean-it.](https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/Decoder/2013/0107/Republicans-talk-up-a-government-shutdown.-Do-they-mean-it.)

28 The Policy Paradox Implicit in Defining Freedom as Agency

The principal aim of our regime is to maximize individual freedom, and this aspiration is increasingly understood in our culture as a nearly unfettered capacity to do what one wishes as long as it does not injure someone else. However, as alluring as this view of freedom as personal capacity to do what one wishes within very broad bounds may appear, it assumes perfect or near-perfect agency. That is, to adopt it one must also assume that individuals always know what they want, or better, perhaps, what they need. But that is surely not the case. Human beings are variously mature and wise, possess different levels of education and exhibit markedly different capacities and proclivities for insight and sensitivity. Moreover, they do not live as autonomous individuals, but in families and households that shape them in manifold ways. Even the most perspicacious among us may not always know what we need and we are unlikely in practice to make many judgments concerning such matters by ourselves in any case.

To complicate matters still further, what I have noted thus far assumes we are discussing people of at least normal intelligence and without addictions or impairments of various kinds, whether physical, intellectual or psychological. Individuals with these characteristics may lack sufficient agency to assume responsibility for their choices or even to understand those possibilities fully. Nonetheless, how one is to make a judgment concerning their relative fitness to make decisions for themselves as a matter of policy is ever a vexing issue in our culture, given our organization around a liberal ideal and pervasive assumption that freedom means choosing for oneself.

This paradox of how to address human imperfections of capacity in a society that defines freedom as the ability to choose is evident in many policy issues. A few examples will illustrate the concern. In child welfare policy, the courts and agencies alike today routinely seek to maintain children with their biological parent or parents whenever possible in lieu of removing them to foster care when the birth parent or parents falter in their parental duties. As a practical matter, this predilection often involves keeping children who have been neglected by a drug-addicted mom or dad with those adults and providing the parents counseling or support. In other cases,

it involves allowing an intellectually impaired or mentally ill mother or father to retain custody of a child or children despite repeated instances of possible neglect or abuse linked to their condition. This stance is taken believing that youngsters will be better off with their biological parents, whatever their capacities and history. Deciding for those parents that they are incapable of caring for their children unless massive evidence can be adduced to support removing them from their care is now widely considered an abridgement of the parents' rights and freedom.

If drug addicted, mentally ill and impaired individuals pose a dilemma of how much to defer to their standing as parents when considering the often-difficult implications of their condition for their children, the same issue characterizes treatment of alcoholics who are parents. Like drug addiction, alcoholism can and does impair judgment while also creating untenable conditions for minors who may go unsupervised or be asked to shoulder undue responsibility due to the debilitation of one or more of their parents with the disease. But when do such conditions constitute sufficient neglect to require that a child or children be removed from their home? When a youngster ingests dangerous prescription medicines while their parent is unconscious from drinking too much? When a toddler wanders aimlessly about the neighborhood until a local resident recognizes him or her and calls the authorities? Alcoholics, like most other people with addictions, will nearly always promise that the most recent scenario of neglect or torpor will be their last, even as the recidivism rates associated with the malady belie their contention. When and how should policy-makers decide that an individual does not deserve an additional chance and (in these examples) should no longer be trusted to care for their children when the undergirding policy assumption is that they should enjoy such standing in principle as free individuals?

The same dilemma obtains in international development, but for different reasons. In this case, would-be aid workers are persistently challenged to ensure the freedom and dignity—understood as capacity to choose for themselves—of those they would assist. But how does one do that when individuals receiving succor may have no wherewithal to judge whether the proposed intervention is good or bad for their interests? This may be so not because they are unintelligent or incapable, but because they have had no experience with a proposed alternative and therefore possess no ability to judge its implications for their lives. Is one impairing their freedom and patronizing them by suggesting it really would be a good thing if they

undertook a step when they themselves are uncertain concerning whether or how to proceed for any of these reasons? Has their freedom been undone thereby, and is one per se guilty of the worst sort of condescending behavior in urging such a course?

Finally, our collective liberal view of freedom poses a dilemma for those people among us who are severely or profoundly intellectually impaired. How do we ensure that these individuals are treated with dignity and their rights protected when we so lightly and so often assume that freedom is contingent on one's capacity to make autonomous choices? In many cases, plainly, these people cannot make decisions for themselves, but should that make them less free or less deserving of their full human rights and standing thereby?

In sum, United States social policy-making today is rife with examples in which officials charged with implementing various programs must make choices concerning the relative capacities of individuals to undertake their responsibilities. We now err in favor of the persons addressed in the name of assuring their freedom and because we commonly assign such rights to them a priori. Nevertheless, that course may be neither wise nor judicious in specific instances. Yet, we have created a social expectation that now governs policy practice that we should defer to individuals nominally responsible for their own or others' lives and the choices that shape them. To address this paradox, it appears we must first acknowledge the implications of our understanding of freedom for our social policy, and second and thereafter, begin to develop guidance and programs that can be sensitive to situational realities, rather than circumscribe them by adopting a paradigm and decision rules rooted in unrealistic and sometimes inapplicable in-principle claims arising from the assumed agency of the principals involved.

(Originally published July 1, 2013)

29 Counting the Costs of Policy-Making by Ideological Abstraction

I confess I am increasingly at sea as I try to make sense of the actions of the Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives. That caucus recently supported several of its more zealously ideological members and decided to cut the nation's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) support by \$20.5 billion, thereby going on record as wanting to eliminate food assistance to nearly 2 million low-income people in a weak economy. Fortunately, the bill ultimately was defeated, when that same group failed to support other provisions of its own party's effort. There is little doubt that the funding reduction, had it held up, would have left many Americans hungry. Most of those who would have lost support were senior citizens or working families with children. But the fact remains that the GOP-led House so voted and that Party's members' rhetoric accompanying the action was harsh and often ugly.

E.J. Dionne captured what I find so troubling about the House's proposed SNAP reductions when he noted, "There is something profoundly wrong when a legislative majority is so eager to risk leaving so many Americans hungry."¹ Elsewhere in his essay, Dionne observed that one key concern this episode revealed was "a shockingly cruel attitude toward the poor on the part of the Republican majority."² That these legislators behaved this way bespeaks a prevailing brand of radical thought afoot these days in the GOP that argues that seniors and the poor—even those who are working—and other groups who need public assistance somehow represent a cancer on society. Notably, the proposition is self-confirming. Individuals who require support can be branded as pariah in this view precisely because they are receiving public aid.

More deeply, in this ideological telling, any public program or action aimed at providing succor to another citizen has been labeled as suspect and, most often, undue and unnecessary. In the prevailing view, in the House Tea Party caucus particularly, individuals receiving aid are "takers," dragging down and living parasitically off those who are "producers." For many of these leaders the next step, on the basis of this thinking, is to conclude that the "leech-

like” citizens who need assistance must be weaned from their freeloading stance. The truth is that none of this argument has an empirical basis and the reality of poverty and hunger is far more complex than this simplistic narrative suggests. But even beyond the question of fact, I have been striving to understand how these individuals could rationalize a view that ultimately assumes that any claim to help their fellow citizens via government is per se problematic, if not dangerous.

As discomfiting as this cruel contempt for the idea of owing anything to the democratic community or commons that underpins the assault on the poor by Republicans in the House is, it has nonetheless lately indirectly been given a boost by conservative members of the U.S. Supreme Court. A majority of the justices on that bench recently struck down a central provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which choice immediately permitted several GOP-majority state legislatures to proceed with actions aimed at reducing access to the polls for minority, poor and elderly voters.³ Ironically, to reach their ruling, the justices had to ignore the recent Republican Party penchant to use voter identification and registration requirements as well as redistricting to keep members of groups (the poor and minorities especially) that they perceive as less likely to vote for their candidates from casting ballots in the name of preventing non-existent fraud. Following the Court’s decision, Texas, for example, quickly set out to implement registration and identification requirements that had been blocked previously by a federal three-judge panel as patently discriminatory against minority voters in that state.

In the short term, most analysts believe, assuming the Republican Party proceeds as now seems probable, the new state-level districts and voter documentation requirements supported by the GOP and symbolized by Texas’ actions will at least marginally suppress minority voting (roughly 2 percent or so on average) and dilute its consequences, and will help to solidify Republican control in many states in its Southern base despite their changing demographic characteristics. In the longer pull, taking these actions will exacerbate alienation from the party among members of groups set to become America’s majority population in coming decades. In consequence, as the numbers of minorities continue to grow in GOP dominated states, the likely result of the current Republican effort to undermine voting rights for these groups will be an electoral backlash against that party. Meanwhile, the Court’s ruling has provided the radicals now controlling the GOP discretion to ensure their current power and

standing while reassuring their followers that they have neutralized any perceived threat from the “others” whose political rights they actively seek to deny.

It is the cynical, sweeping and cruel character of these actions toward the hungry, and toward the vulnerable and minorities more generally in these two realms of action, that I find so difficult to fathom. The Supreme Court did not need legally to rule on the Voting Rights provision. It chose to do so and to ignore willfully in the process the empirical reality of nativism and chauvinism and ongoing ham-handed assaults on voting rights in Republican-dominated states. For voting rights, the question this scenario raises is, Why GOP legislators believe in the first instance they can simply declare major portions of the American citizenry as undeserving and unfit to be members of the political community? For public support for those in need, the question is, when did it become permissible for these Republican legislators to consign a child or a senior citizen to hunger on the abstract basis that they are undeserving because they are “takers”? How do these legislators justify the idea that we can live in a society in which some are allowed their rights and others are systematically deprived both of those rights and of their means of sustaining themselves? How can we call such a society democratic at all?

These are unsettling questions and I am saddened to raise them. I am somewhat heartened that Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, of Virginia, who has so often led the GOP assault on comity and the idea of the democratic commons in that body, has recently expressed interest in ensuring that all citizens have unfettered access to the franchise.⁴ One may hope that others in his party will listen and act soon to stop their efforts to limit this singular democratic right. The nation is too far along already on a path to declaring some Americans “rights-worthy” and others not on the basis of discriminatory criteria that appear rooted, finally, in fear, contempt and a quest for power.

Perhaps revisiting their Party’s recent embrace of efforts to block minority access to the ballot, now ironically available to them strategically thanks to the high court’s Voting Rights Act decision, will prompt GOP leaders likewise to rethink their assumption that the poor and vulnerable constitute parasites on the body politic. Republican Party actions concerning voting and support for the poor rest on a constricted view of political community that is ultimately illiberal and undemocratic. The GOP has de facto targeted minorities and the poor in its efforts to make voting more difficult for

citizens in many states even as it has demonized the vulnerable and individuals without means in its rhetoric concerning social support programs. All of this has resulted in a prolonged attack on the very idea of democratic community. I hope Republican leaders will soon come to realize that the party's assumptions will neither conduce to their quest for power nor sustain a free society in the long run.

(Originally published July 8, 2013)

Notes

- ¹ Dionne, E.J. 2013. "Boehner's House Implodes Over Flawed Farm Bill," *The Washington Post*, June 23. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ej-dionne-boehners-house-implodes-over-flawed-farm-bill/2013/06/23/b6807272-dc41-11e2-bd83-e99e43c336ed_story.html?utm_term=.ac89542ded24.
- ² Dionne, "Boehner's House implodes."
- ³ Liptak, Adam. 2013. "Supreme Court Invalidates Key Part of Voting Rights Act," *The New York Times*, June 26. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/supreme-court-ruling.html>.
- ⁴ Everett, Burgess, and Jake Sherman. 2013. "Cantor Urges 'Responsible Path'" *Politico*, June 25. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/06/voting-rights-act-congress-093331>.

30 Egypt and the Enduring Challenges of Democracy's Preconditions

New York Times columnist David Brooks earned a public and angry scolding (and worse) from *Salon* writer David Sirota this past week when he offered a column defending the recent removal from office by the military, with broad popular support, of Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi.¹ As Brooks considered the reaction to this signal event, he drew a dichotomy between those who defined Egypt's democracy in processual terms and those who instead emphasized substantive criteria.² Brooks noted that individuals who describe democracy principally as free and fair elections in which a majority make clear their will have strongly condemned the military's action, despite the fact that it arose from direct petition and the grassroots street protests of some 14-16 million Egyptians that took place over several days.

Brooks argued that those who view democracy in substantive terms have tended to emphasize the culture of fanaticism of the Muslim Brotherhood from which Morsi emerged and have looked more kindly on the government change in consequence. Many of the Brotherhood's members, Brooks noted, have apocalyptic perspectives and exhibit contempt for pluralistic secular democracy. As a result, he contended, as a group, they are unable to trust and mobilize diverse constituencies and therefore tended to centralize and arrogate power to themselves, and thereby undermined democracy, during Morsi's tenure in office. Brooks went further to observe that this basic dearth of imaginative possibility to conceive of the requisites of democratic governance among Morsi and the Brotherhood, or what he dubbed the lack of even the "basic mental ingredients" necessary for democracy, suggests that achieving such a form of government will be difficult to obtain and sustain in Egypt in the near term.³

Overall, Brooks offered three basic points in his commentary. First, institutionalizing democracy in Egypt or any other nation requires far more than elections alone, however well conducted. This point is certainly not controversial among democratic theorists, but many who have condemned the recent popular and military revolt in Egypt have not acknowledged it and concentrated instead on the fact that Morsi was elected and then removed

without a fresh election. In this regard, it is important to note that Egypt has historically never enjoyed democratic rule, so few citizens within the nation can say they understand deeply the habits of mind and heart (civic virtues) necessary in the population to sustain it. Second, the columnist suggested that militant Islamists (of which, he argued, Morsi and the Brotherhood should be seen as exemplars) simply do not possess a habit of mind or mental frame that supports pluralism of belief and perspective. This point is surely more difficult to sustain than that concerning elections, but Morsi had shown himself to be unwilling to listen to any but his own party's views and to be willing to subvert the nation's institutions and freedom and democracy (the courts and judicial review, arresting activists and concentrating power in his office) in pursuit of power for himself and his supporters, rather than taking account of the diverse needs and preferences of the nation's population. Finally and relatedly, Brooks argued that Egypt's citizenry more generally has still to develop the civic capacities necessary for long-lived self-governance, though for want of experience, rather than as a result of devotion to an ideology or perspective.

In response to Brooks' commentary, Sirota labeled the columnist a bigot for advancing these contentions:

Since when did *The New York Times* get into the business of publishing old-school bigoted rants deriding whole populations and cultures as cognitively incapacitated?

Following this introduction to his brief essay, Sirota maintained that Brooks had laid aside the nation's long-time dictatorship and American complicity in it as factors in the nation's situation and instead chose to impugn the Egyptian people and their culture. Brooks did not reach the specific question of the American role in Egypt's evolution in his column, but likely would not gainsay its influence.

In any case, the evidence in his essay suggests he had no intention to proclaim the racial inferiority of the Egyptian people. To denigrate Brooks personally rather than address the concerns he highlights is to miss the vital significance and relationship of social acculturation and beliefs to democratic civic capacities that he raises. One could certainly conclude, as Sirota himself did, that Morsi's tenure was 'disastrous' and not declare, as the *Salon* writer did, that exploring how that leader's belief structure and philosophy shaped his rule, constitutes bigotry. It need not.⁴

Labeling Brooks a bigot for raising the questions of whether the Egyptian people yet possess an imaginary, or common shared perspectival values and beliefs frame, that can support democracy amidst a pluralistic population and whether the Brotherhood's core views allowed it truly to support anything other than one-party rule, serves only to stop thoughtful conversation and dialogue. It also ignores a central question in Brooks' column: namely, how can democracies, increasingly defined as they are as providing nearly unfettered capacity for choice-making claims for individuals, assure that their populations also develop an abiding belief in their shared community (however diverse) and the values necessary to sustain it? Democracy is neither created nor maintained by elections alone. Rather, it is preserved by populations dedicated to the freedom and possibility that it represents as a form of governance. In situations of heterogeneity particularly, it is both enduringly important and prudent to ask periodically whether and how a population can develop and maintain the ferocity of dedication necessary to the capacities vital to self-governance. The challenges implicit in doing so are both knotty and ultimately sociologic in character. Hurling epithets at the messenger offering that reminder, and thereby risking the possibility of ending dialogue altogether, will do nothing to attain the conditions required for Egyptian democracy to flourish.

(Originally published July 15, 2013)

Notes

¹ Sirota, David. 2013. "David Brooks' Bigoted Rant." *Salon*, July 5. Available at: https://www.salon.com/2013/07/05/david_brooks_bigoted_rant/.

² Brooks, David. 2013. "Defending the Coup," *The New York Times*, July 4. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/05/opinion/brooks-defending-the-coup.html?ref=davidbrooks>.

³ Brooks, "Defending the Coup."

⁴ Sirota, "David Brooks' Bigoted Rant."

31 Democratic Governance as Fear-Filled Dissembling

Of the primary economic trends now shaping the conditions in which individuals and families are living in the United States, two have drawn increasing attention in recent weeks and months. As for the first development, America is now experiencing the greatest degree of income inequality since at least the Great Depression and, some argue, since the 1880s. In any case, the top 1 percent of American households now earns about one-sixth of all the nation's income and the top 10 percent now earn approximately half of the country's total income. As for wealth, recent estimates by a number of respected economists suggest that the top 1 percent now controls a larger share of the nation's wealth than the bottom 90 percent does.¹ Moreover, in the first year of the nation's recovery from its recent deep recession, the top 1 percent of earners captured 93 percent of the income gains that occurred. Notably, too, the median hourly wage for American workers is now 4 percent lower than it was at the start of the present weak recovery.

The International Monetary Fund warned in 2011 that such high levels of income and wealth inequality as those found in the United States were likely to shorten future economic expansions by as much as a third.² And while this trend has lately become especially dramatic, it is not wholly new. Americans without college or advanced degrees have seen a decline in their real wages relative to those their college graduate counterparts receive since 1973, and that relationship continues to be negative. In short, in inflation-adjusted terms American workers with only a high school education have been losing economic ground for 40 years. This turn has raised profound questions about whether so deeply unequal a distribution of economic goods will de facto undermine political equality (however understood) as well.

The second great economic shift, documented in recent days by a major study by economists at Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley and based on a massive data set of anonymous earning records, is that intergenerational income mobility differs significantly by metropolitan area in the United States.³ In short and taken together, the nation's massive and growing income and wealth inequality and geographically uneven intergenerational mobility has leaders of both major political parties

expressing concern about whether the American Dream of working hard and doing better than one's parents is now simply slipping away as a genuine possibility for millions of the country's residents.

Given these realities, and in light of the exacerbating factors of wage stagnation for many workers and the very slow recovery from the recent "Great Recession," one might expect the nation's legislative leaders to be doing all they could to address these circumstances and concerns. This proposition seems reasonable if weighed only against the short-run electoral costs that this scenario would appear to imply for legislators, but it would also seem to make sense for the long-run good of the citizenry as well.

But at least in the GOP-controlled House of Representatives, this is not the case. In lieu of seeking to use government or public policy to address at least a share of these conditions and the poverty and food and income insecurity linked to them, these officials have instead taken the following actions in recent weeks:

- Voted for reductions of \$40 billion in the nation's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps) during the next decade despite the fact that the long-standing effort has for decades been regarded by both major political parties as a very efficient device to address hunger and food insecurity among the poor and near poor and certainly has done so during the country's recent economic woes.
- Voted (40 separate times and counting) to repeal the nation's 2010 health care law on largely unspecified or vague grounds and in spite of the fact that a successful reversal would mean no or massively reduced access to health insurance and services for millions of Americans.
- Engineered the federal budget sequestration of recent months, which a consensus of economists is now reporting has manifestly slowed the nation's economic recovery and may be endangering it altogether.
- Proved unable to pass a number of national appropriation bills and cannot thus far obtain a party caucus majority to support an omnibus continuing federal budget resolution either. These choices have strongly increased the chance the United States government will once more face a funding crisis as its new fiscal year approaches this fall.

This list might be extended, and it raises the question of why these elected representatives are behaving so irresponsibly. Here are several currently

popular theories aimed at explaining these House GOP caucus actions (their policy prescriptions have drawn virtually no support from Democrats):

- According to conservative and Tea Party-leaning pundits, these officials are protecting Americans from an unspecified, but nonetheless overweening, tyranny of their government and unleashing the power of the markets in so doing.

Whatever one makes of this claim, its supposed corollary of swift (or even much improved) economic growth for all is surely not occurring. What is happening instead are ever more strident forms of rhetorical abstraction and flights of fancy among GOP representatives concerning the alleged overreaching role of government, while the steps these individuals actually have taken have exacerbated the sluggish employment, income and poor mobility conditions millions of Americans now both fear and daily confront.

- Republican House members simply loathe the fact that President Obama is in office (their feelings based either on racial bias on their part or as a result of ideological antipathy or both) and will do anything to obstruct his agenda, even if (when) it means opposing policies that would materially benefit American citizens.

Even if these claims are true or partially true, it is patently unethical, a breach of duty and worse on the part of legislators to impose costs on millions in their name. I do not wish to believe that officials sworn to serve their regime and its citizenry faithfully would so behave.

- Many (if not most) GOP congresspersons are fearful of a far-right libertarianism-soaked movement that might result in an electoral challenge in their districts and are acting to placate potential voters, no matter the consequences of their choices for the broader nation.

My reaction to this explanation is the same as that I offered just above. The cynicism and complete lack of direction and duty this rationale implies are surreal in their democratic implications.

- At least some Republican House caucus members actually believe the hypothetical claims they articulate concerning the nation's government

and its policies, despite the political and economic facts they daily witness that contradict their beliefs.

Even if this explanation is accurate, one might at least hope that the Republic's manifest needs would triumph for these officials since they are sworn to serve their fellow citizens' best interests. But such is not now occurring as these legislators vote virtually daily to support actions that actually have or would worsen life conditions for millions of American citizens, including, paradoxically, many of those who support these officials.

Again, this list might be extended, but it suggests at least two basic points, irrespective of what one decides are the sources of the House's current incapacity to play any meaningful role in the nation's governance. First, these legislators as a group, for whatever their personal and political reasons, are now daily undermining both the nation's capacity to govern itself and its popular legitimacy to do so. Unfortunately, this is true regardless of ideology as Americans of all partisan leanings and views daily watch those elected and sworn to serve their nation fail to perform even their most basic duties. Persistent and wanton failure and an equally pervasive and shrill cynicism among many of these representatives do nothing to justify this reality or to address it. Second, apart from posturing and declaiming against government for actions it purportedly has taken but in fact has not, these representatives have gone on record repeatedly embracing policy steps aimed at depriving American citizens of important services and the nation of key economic support at a time of obvious and widely felt need. Why this is so and what can be done about it has now emerged as a vexing and pressing national imperative. Only the country's citizens can demand change in these behaviors. It remains to be seen whether such can occur against these incumbents' ever more radical posturing against government, and the equally extreme gerrymandering of their House districts and their party's ongoing attempts to limit access to the franchise for millions of Americans.

(Originally published August 11, 2013)

Notes

¹ Stiglitz, Joseph, 2011. "Of the 1%, By the 1%, For the 1%," *Vanity Fair*, May. Available at: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105>.

² International Monetary Fund, 2011. "All for One: Why Economic Inequality

Throws Us off Balance,” *Finance and Development*, September. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2011/09/pdf/fd0911.pdf>.

³ Leonhardt, David. 2013. “When Climbing Economic Ladders, Location Matters,” *The New York Times*, July 22. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/22/business/in-climbing-income-ladder-location-matters.html>.

32 Blaming the Poor

Some share of the enormous power of Charles Dickens' work lies in its persistent examination of what it means to belong or not belong to family and to community. Dickens himself became homeless for a period at age 11 when his father, a feckless pay clerk in the British Navy office, was sent to debtor's prison at Marshalsea with his mother and younger siblings while Dickens was placed in menial labor for some months in a blacking factory. Many critics have seen this difficult time as shaping all of Dickens' large oeuvre and his life-long interest in the poor, poverty and its implications for the human spirit. The distinguished author himself spoke with intense emotion and sadness on more than one occasion of this trying episode in his life. The broader community had cast aside and labeled as contemptible those whom Dickens met in the boot polish plant, just as his family had set him apart (at least temporarily) and consigned him to a like fate. He never forgot this searing experience and he captured the cruel social spirit of callous indifference that underpinned it in the character (among many others) of Ebenezer Scrooge in his novella *A Christmas Carol*.¹

I found myself reflecting on this important dimension of Dickens' work when reading a review recently of Robert Gottlieb's *Great Expectations: The Sons and Daughters of Charles Dickens*.² I also happened to see the results of a recent poll of current American attitudes toward poverty at about the same time. Together, these two items caused me to consider afresh how little matters and values have changed since Dickens lived.

That is, like many in Victorian times, many in the United States and elsewhere today see the poor collectively as of a single sort and character. Roughly a quarter of Americans, 24 percent, and the largest percentage of those responding to an NBC-*Wall Street Journal* poll in June 2013, suggest that "too much welfare preventing initiative" was "most responsible for the continuing problem of poverty in the U.S." Likewise, many Britons in the Victorian period blamed the poor for their condition and imagined their situation was born of weak character or sloth or both. Those with this view imagine people experiencing poverty to be grasping connivers more than willing to "depend" on the kindness of those providing aid to them while making no genuine effort to support themselves and their families. Thus, one can provide "too much" sustenance to assist the poor under this assumption.

On this view, the appropriate response to poverty is to deny any assistance to those in need as it will only foster their “dependence” on such support and sap any effort they might otherwise exert to help themselves.

This characterization of the poor is surely at play in the current GOP whose 2012 Presidential standard-bearer, Mitt Romney, infamously declared in a fundraising speech that fully 47 percent of the nation’s population is “dependent” and therefore politically unreachable (not to say irrelevant) by a political party celebrating initiative. This attitude also underpinned the recent decision by that Party’s majority in the House of Representatives to vote for very large reductions (\$40 billion) in the nations’ nutrition assistance program during the next decade. Romney’s statement bore no relationship to reality in 2012 when he spoke, just as the Republican Party House action concerning food stamps was unrelated to actual hunger and food insecurity conditions in the United States in 2013, when its members voted. Likewise, cruel popular conceptions of the poor and vulnerable as wastrels and worse bore no empirical connection to the reality of poverty in Victorian England when the author of *David Copperfield* wrote.

In fact, as Dickens’ novels demonstrated again and again, poor people find themselves in such straits for a mind-numbing variety of reasons, the largest share of which have no relationship to lassitude or to the availability of outside support. The poor, as all of humanity, the writer’s tales revealed, evidence a rich palette of values and behaviors; some few are scoundrels, as are some share of human beings more generally. But the vast majority of those who experience poverty are not villains and are certainly not in their condition of need so as to take advantage of those with means to assist them. That is, the largest share of the poor are not enduring lives of continuing difficulty or misery in order to cheat or be dependent on their fellow citizens. All of this raises questions: How can today’s GOP embrace the myth that Dickens worked so hard to dispel, that the poor both create their state and can easily overcome it if they would but try? How can so many in our own society embrace so misleading a view of poverty and vulnerability?

I cannot say I know why this broad-brushing of a swathe of humanity as possessing the same character and characteristics is once more enjoying appeal even though it fails to comport with the known facts. But I think it may be bound up with human beings’ consistent need to find others over whom they may exercise power and for whom they may exhibit disdain. These behaviors have ever been built on difference, with one tribal, ethnic, social or economic group distinguishing itself as superior to one or more

“others” on the basis of some identified characteristic. On this basis some are allowed “in,” while others are vilified and forced “out,” as Dickens so powerfully experienced as a young boy. It is this issue that is so difficult for democratic self-governance, and if heterogeneity is a problem generally for democracy, it is often presented as easier to address when those perceived as different can be dismissed as “less than” and therefore not considered. The poor and vulnerable have long been placed in this category in our own and many other societies.

Perhaps another reason for this willingness of some Americans and populations around the globe to demonize the poor and blame them for their own difficulties is an innate fear that if one admitted that some share of the condition of the poverty-stricken might not be controllable by simple volition, one might thereby be required to recognize that the situations in which these people find themselves might befall one as well. Such is at best disquieting and more likely frightening. Far easier and more comforting psychologically, then, to assign the poor malignant characteristics and imagine that they could “fix” their circumstances if they would but try. This pushes the possible devil far from one’s own door.

Finally, and perhaps most repugnant of all rationales of which I can conceive for debasement of those experiencing poverty, is that this population provides a convenient scapegoat for would-be elected democratic leaders to use to mobilize voters. If a politician can convince citizens to blame a group at whatever scale for all or a significant share of their perceived woes and thereby “explain” the source of such ills, i.e., lack of rising incomes or employment possibilities or other problems afflicting society, that candidate may gain votes and thereby attain power. Leaders in many nations have followed this script, often with tragic results for human freedom, but it is no less frequently powerful and well used for that. Fear and insecurity are formidable forces.

All of this is to call once more for a politics of prudence predicated on facts and not myths concerning the wellsprings of the nation’s problems. The poor did not create this country’s economic woes and should not be made convenient scapegoats for the painful steps that will be required to address them. A democratic nation cannot survive by maligning a share of its population and by imagining that it need not include all members of its community. One may, of course, debate how best to include all appropriately, while not scapegoating any single group or demographic in so doing. A free

nation should demand no less and only its people can ensure just such if it wishes to remain free.

(Originally published August 18, 2013)

Notes

¹ Dickens, Charles. 1843. *A Christmas Carol*. London: Chapman and Hall.

² Gottlieb, Robert. 2012. *Great Expectations: The Sons and Daughters of Charles Dickens*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

33 Discounting the Future

National Public Radio offered a story this week following up on the ferocious tornado that devastated Moore, Oklahoma, in May that resulted in the deaths of seven students and 18 other residents and the destruction of two elementary schools and 1,000 homes.¹ The report illustrated three larger characteristics of today's American politics, while not specifically highlighting them. I address those traits below.

The explicit goal of the news story was to investigate how the school system and state were faring in developing tornado-proof spaces for students to prevent tragedies of the sort that occurred in Moore in the future. Moore, with its 23,000 school-aged youths, like the remainder of Oklahoma, lies squarely within the multi-state area known as "Tornado Alley" and so is annually susceptible to such weather events. The upshot of the report was that the state has done little since the twister struck and is not prepared to take an active role in facilitating the development of storm shelters in schools (there is no plan to create them), because there is no political will to undertake the effort to do so. In a comment that perhaps inadvertently underscored this point, the state's gubernatorial spokesman Alex Weintz said:

We have well over a thousand school buildings in the state of Oklahoma. And we think it would cost probably at least \$2 billion to build new storm shelters or safe rooms in each one of those, and that's a little under a third of the state's entire budget for a year. It's not realistic to think that the state would be able to pay for a tornado shelter in each school.²

One need not quibble with Weintz's cost estimate or his portrayal of the Oklahoma budget to note that the state does not need to build all such facilities in one year. It seems reasonable to suppose that Oklahoma could work with its localities to develop a multi-year plan for their completion, providing tornado shelters for those schools most at risk first and addressing others in order of perceived relative jeopardy. Weintz also did not mention the fact that the federal government has assisted the state and localities in building such spaces, which are expensive, in the past by defraying a significant portion of their cost and would do so in the future. So the

argument Weintz offered had little to do either with the fiscal feasibility of Oklahoma undertaking such an initiative, difficult or not, or with assessing the relative risk that might demand it. Instead, his comments were apparently calculated to suggest it was beyond the pale. As the reporter noted at the story's close, "whether Oklahoma's (state) leaders share (the local Moore school administrator's passion for securing shelters) is not so clear."³

Meanwhile, Moore school officials interviewed for the story indicated that their goal was indeed to provide just such safe areas for their schools. To do so, they have launched a campaign to raise the funds necessary not only from local government, but also from private citizens and organizations (\$2 million in private funds have been raised to date) in order to provide what they take to be a critical public service. In short, education and civic leaders are seeking to ensure what the state government is thus far uninterested in offering by raising a significant portion of the funds needed from private sources. There is no guarantee Moore's school officials will succeed.

As I noted, this story illustrates three features of today's politics. First, Oklahoma's elected leaders are willing to risk more children's deaths as a result of tornadoes by not providing storm shelters in schools because that effort would require significant resources in the near term. That is, they are willing to impose future risks and costs so as to minimize claims on today's taxpayers, even when those dangers, however infrequent, are potentially severe. A similar political calculation has created a massive infrastructure crisis in this country.

Second and related, this electoral calculus is oriented only to the short run. State (and national) leaders are aware of the costs of allowing infrastructure to deteriorate, just as they are aware of the risks of not protecting school children against potential future natural disasters. But in both cases, the possibility of calamity is unpredictable and will only occur in the future and so may be ignored or foisted off to future leaders and residents in favor of the specific claims of the moment. From the point-of-view of today's state officials, the results of their attitude can possibly be cataclysmic, but the timing of disasters is not certain and so their risk may be borne without undue political cost. The long-term costs of broken highways or bridges will be very large indeed, as will additional preventable children's deaths in another Moore-like tragedy, but neither is obvious now, while the costs of addressing each presently looms large.

Finally, the governor and state leaders have created a scenario in which their refusal to help to fund a public good adequately is resulting in its partial privatization. One may debate whether services should be provided, but that is not now occurring among Oklahoma officials; instead, financing for shelters has simply been declared fiscally untenable. The result is a locally sponsored initiative that is redefining a public good, at least partly, as a privately financed commodity, whether or not the effort succeeds. The Moore case reveals that when elected federal or state officials refuse (de facto or more obviously) to accept responsibility for a service or they elect to redefine that good as no longer a public one, it may leave local leaders no option but to privatize it to have any chance of providing it. Notably, any possible change in this scenario rests squarely with the need for an attentive and informed public with a willingness to bear some costs on behalf of future generations. Oklahoma's state leaders apparently perceive no such pressures from their constituency, but a clear evocation of their emergence could change the current situation quickly and markedly.

(Originally published August 26, 2013)

Notes

¹ Gwaltney, Kurt. 2013. "Oklahoma School Districts Consider Adding Storm Shelters," *National Public Radio*, August 16. Available at:

<https://www.npr.org/2013/08/16/212527881/oklahoma-school-districts-consider-adding-storm-shelters>.

² Gwaltney, "Oklahoma Schools Consider Storm Shelters."

³ Gwaltney, "Oklahoma Schools Consider Storm Shelters."

SECTION II
UNDERMINING THE
FUNDAMENTS OF
DEMOCRACY
(2014-2015)

34 Democracy, Freedom and Heterogeneity

It might be argued that human heterogeneity is the bane of democracy. Writing in 1748 in *The Spirit of the Laws*, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, contended that its effects could not be overcome and that a society had to be both small and homogenous to be free.¹ The Baron made this argument, following some 20 years of intensive study and after having read Thomas Hobbes and John Locke who each had postulated that, left to their own devices, human beings would soon create insufferable living conditions for one another. This would occur due to their propensity to find reasons to scorn and tyrannize one another, based in part on their individual physical needs, and in part on their perceived differences and their incapacity in their selfishness to accept those. Following these celebrated thinkers, Montesquieu suggested humans could not accept differences among their number and would instead use those to deprive one another of their freedom. For the Baron, that reality implied that to attain a free and democratic society, individuals had to be similar so as to be less likely to find cause to “other” those unlike themselves in their midst and thereby imperil the freedom of all.

In practice, this stricture, for Montesquieu, meant that members of a self-governing population could differ little along lines of ethnicity, tribe, race and religion, among other possibly divisive characteristics. Montesquieu also postulated that freedom could not be preserved if the populace involved did not possess virtue; that is, if its members could not act on behalf of others and be willing to accede to the needs of the commons in lieu of their personal desires, when prudent and appropriate to do so for the public good. Since Hobbes and Locke, among others, had argued that human beings did not naturally consistently evidence such capacities, Montesquieu contended, these attributes had to be encouraged by social and governance structures whenever possible. A population that would be free had constantly and persistently to be acculturated to virtue, understood in this way.

Put differently, the Swiss Baron took it for granted that the ugly wellsprings of behavior emphasized by Hobbes, which suggested that human beings could not naturally tolerate differences among themselves without finding cause to use those distinctions to hate and tyrannize, were both

ever operative and unavoidable. One could not eliminate these impulses. The challenge instead was to find means to control them, including designing governing institutions predicated on a realistic assessment of their implications for social well-being.

Agreeing with this judgment and with the analysis underpinning it, our nation's framers nonetheless disputed Montesquieu's conclusion that only a small and homogeneous republic could endure given this reality. Writing in *The Federalist*, James Madison suggested that federalism, a separation of powers and the checking power of competing factions would serve in a large and heterogeneous society to rein in humanity's impulse to deprive some in their number of their rights based on their real or imagined differences.² While arguing that such a republic could survive, the Founders nonetheless agreed with Montesquieu that the citizenry needed also to possess virtue if tyrannical behavior was to be prevented. To realize that result the Framers sought both to ensure that those who could vote would have a stake in the regime and to guarantee that those who participated in politics would likely discipline their own behavior in the name of the commons. Alexander Hamilton argued in *The Federalist* that leaders would be encouraged so to behave out of concern for how future generations might regard them.³

All well and good, one might say, but there is surely substantial evidence in recent United States and world history that suggests how difficult it is to entrust human beings to deal successfully with difference and thereby to preserve the freedom of diverse groups within their societies. Globally, unscrupulous leaders from Hitler to Milosevic to the organizers of the genocide in Rwanda have successfully exploited human propensities to hate on the basis of difference in their quest for power. While not genocidal, Americans saw fit nonetheless to tyrannize Japanese Americans by "interning" them during World War II, and for too many years discriminated formally in law against African Americans and many other minority groups. These more recent examples are but a small sample of many that might be cited. This fact suggests that the impulse to loathe, fear and mistrust on the basis of difference remains a strong force among human beings generally and in the U.S. population, too. It may not be viewed simply as a problem of the 18th century.

As a correspondent writing first from England, and then from the front in North Africa and during the invasion of Italy by allied troops during World War II, John Steinbeck pointed to another dimension of the portent of heterogeneity for democracy and freedom by highlighting what might

be called its dual character. Steinbeck's dispatches were collected and published in 1958 as *Once there was a War*, and he remarked in one report that the problem of difference was nonetheless real among even the closest of allied troops when they imagined their compatriots in group rather than individual terms:

The whole problem seems to lie in generalities (about groups). Once you have made a generality, you are stuck with it. You have to defend it. Let's say the British and/or American soldier is a superb soldier. The British and/or American officer is a gentleman. You start in with a lie. There are good ones and bad ones. ... We get along very well as individuals. But just the moment we become the Americans and they become the British, trouble is not far behind.⁴

Paradoxically, people who differ along many characteristics may have strong rapport as individuals, but as soon as someone reminds them of their dissimilarities and aggregates those to broader populations, this picture clouds considerably. Thus, one may get on well with a member of another religious, ethnic or racial group as neighbors until that person is assigned membership in an amorphous and generalized "other" group and you are told they are, for example, "taking" your job. Just this sort of argument was employed to demonize Hispanic immigrants in parts of the United States during the recent economic recession. As Steinbeck predicted, when that population came to be treated as a group by many Americans it could be "othered" and all manner of uninformed and vicious discrimination could ensue. Some U.S. and state political, economic and media leaders have made similar claims over the years, suggesting that Jews, Catholics, African Americans and immigrants and citizens of Irish, Chinese or Japanese descent were somehow less than other Americans, but nonetheless threatening as groups and therefore appropriately were the target of mass discrimination and steps to deny them their civil rights.

It seems safe to conclude that heterogeneity remains a principal challenge to self-governance and the assurance of civil rights in the United States and elsewhere today. Interestingly, it appears even more important now than when the Founders wrote to recognize the importance of acculturating the citizenry to Montesquieu's understanding of virtue. The last several years have demonstrated that a determined minority can effectively block our nation's institutions from accurately reflecting the will of the country's

majority, while also revealing a propensity among some of our political leaders to “other” groups in our diverse society to gain political advantage in the short-term. History and philosophy alike suggest this tendency is dangerous for freedom. It is more significant than ever that our citizens be equipped to judge such claims prudently and to realize their implications not only for their own supposed advantage, but also for their communities. This concern is vital and the dangers to be addressed real and continuing, if freedom for all is to be preserved in our heterogeneous society.

(Originally published February 17, 2014)

Notes

¹ Montesquieu, Charles-Louis. 1748, 1989. *The Spirit of the Laws*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

² Hamilton, Alexander; James Madison; John Jay. 1887. *The Federalist: A Collection of Essays, Written in Favour of the New Constitution, as Agreed upon by the Federal Convention*. New York: J&A McLean. James Madison, Nos., 10 and 47.

³ Hamilton, *The Federalist*, No. 68.

⁴ Steinbeck, John. 1958, 2013. *Once there was a War*. London: Folio Society edition, pp. 69-70.

35 Presence and Absence and Democratic Agency

The idea of participatory space for democratic political agency is an oddly paradoxical one in that it appears to suggest that emptiness is essential for a fully free possibility. I was reminded of that contradiction by three passages from the *Tao Te Ching*, the ancient Chinese classic, by Lao-Tzu, translated by Stephen Mitchell:

We shape clay into a pot
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.

We work with being,
but non-being is what we use.¹

Each of these deceptively simple, yet deeply thought-provoking observations suggests that absence is another form of presence, while also connoting that it is the space that often proves the most essential or useful dimension of the labor that wrought and structured it. But that outcome (or space) is, interestingly, not sufficient to itself. That is, those who inhabit a house and use the rooms it provides will determine the nature of that space and make it a home, or not. A dwelling must be occupied to realize its full function, but those who live within it will determine the qualities that characterize that use. Similarly, a clay pot must be used to accomplish its function, but some who use the vessel may fill it with water and others may use it for a plant or grain. Likewise, we daily act consciously on only a small part of who we are while drawing deeply on reservoirs of capability of which we are fitfully, if ever, actively aware. It is that mindfulness, however fleeting, that allows us to know of the capacities of which we are otherwise often quite oblivious. Some will be more aware of those faculties and seek actively to engage them; others will be less involved in doing so and not as sensitive to their presence.

These examples could be extended, but by analogy they suggest how critical it may be for a democratic citizenry to realize that the freedom it enjoys is not the product of leaders, structure or institutions alone, but of populations' daily engagement with and support of those, and of how conscious they are of the possibilities represented by each. These insights from the *Tao* indicate that human beings often sense the full import of an event, or an exchange or the absence of the once familiar only after it has occurred or has been lost. So it seems to be with democratic agency, by which term theorists mean to suggest that individuals believe themselves enabled and capable of taking political action to act upon and to preserve their individual and collective freedom. A government may provide formal space for the exercise of such efficacy and have it go unused, just as one may build a house and find it remain vacant in whole or in part or in practice. Individuals must exercise their democratic role to enjoy the full measure of its effects, just as to enjoy all that a structure's space may provide, one must inhabit it fully.

Many factors may prevent people from developing or exercising their political agency, including lack of awareness of its significance, active formal or informal discrimination (imposed by the state or practiced by fellow citizens), cultural norms, fear, apathy and so on. Government prevention of participatory possibility may be more or less complete. If it is total, a people cannot be free. If partial, only some selected among the whole can be free. And, again, even these cannot realize their agency if, for other reasons, they do not exercise it, even if they possess it. Women may have been acculturated to believe they could not participate in public affairs or should not vote. Certain ethnic groups or classes of citizens might have been the target of public animosity their entire lives, such as the Akhdam in Yemen or Dalit in India, for example. Or some people in a community may so distrust their government, for whatever complex array of reasons—some justified (corruption or lack of accountability and transparency) and some not (ideologically induced loathing)—that they turn from it and fail to act with efficacy. In such cases, too, agency is not realized.

Put differently, unless a population possesses the space for civic participation, can act upon it and does so with some measure of consistency, it is unlikely either to remain democratically healthy or to retain the freedom on which that sense of efficacy depends in the long run. As I reflect, it seems to me that the ubiquity of legislative gerrymandering at state and federal scales in the United States now threatens the full exercise of agency,

even when citizens possess it, as do efforts by some legislators to prevent exercise of the franchise by groups they do not favor on whatever grounds. A decades-long effort by some partisans to bring citizens to despise the governance institutions over which they are sovereign also undermines citizen efficacy.

These major difficulties are intertwined with other cultural factors that hamper individual exercise of agency in the United States today, including the increasing role of market interests in policy-making and many citizens' poor understanding of their regime's institutions and political processes. Together, all of these influences are limiting U.S. citizen development and exercise of political agency. Sooner or later, we shall notice as a polity the combined claim of this absence as a singular presence in what once was our free and democratic way of life. Its enervation may be linked to many factors, but the house's emptiness, the dearth of inhabitants making its space their own or, perhaps eventually, the evanescence of the dwelling that provides that opportunity, will be no less palpable for that fact.

(Originally published March 24, 2014)

Notes

¹ Lao-Tzu. 1990 (translation), *Tao Te Ching* (Stephen Mitchell, translator). Genius (website). Available at: <http://thetaoteching.com/taoteching11.html>, Ch. 11.

36 The Puzzle of Malignant Social Fantasies

Three interrelated items caught my attention in recent days. First, I received a fund-raising letter from the United States Holocaust Museum (USHM). Letters from all manner of organizations seeking support fill my mailbox daily, so receipt of this correspondence was hardly noteworthy in that respect. Instead, I was struck afresh that the Museum is a United States government entity. Were we not living in a neoliberal era with Congress insisting that the institution raise a substantial share of its own funds from private donors in lieu of tax dollars, one might have imagined a public institution would not be soliciting donations. Nevertheless, USHM's budget allocation and legislative accountability claims are such that it has been given no choice but to do so. Like the Smithsonian Institution and many other nominally public organizations, including my own university, the Holocaust Museum must raise a significant share of its needed expenditures each year despite its "public" status.

This said, I also noted the following statement in the institution's letter, written by French author, artist and Holocaust survivor Simon Jeruchim:

At a time when Holocaust denial is surging worldwide, including in the very lands where it occurred, Holocaust evidence and artifacts—like these drawings— (reproductions were enclosed) stand as a powerful counter to those who say it never happened.¹

This specific observation caused me to ask what, precisely, "deniers" argue and to ponder why it is they would do so, as well as why their numbers would be growing. As I explored various sources concerning these questions, I learned two notable things. First, as an empirical proposition, most of those who argue the Holocaust did not occur are profoundly anti-Semitic. Indeed, many of these individuals, although not all, contend that Jews developed claims regarding that historically unprecedented effort as a grand conspiracy to benefit their population. Just how this assumed scheme benefits Jews is never really adequately explained. I found myself wondering what would cause one to adopt this stance in the face of incontrovertible

proof to the contrary, including statements by the Nazi leaders responsible for the killings.

Speaking of that evidence, I discovered as I read that when General George Patton, Commander, Third U. S. Army, and General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, visited the newly liberated internment camp at Gotha in April 1945, Patton would not enter one room for fear he would become sick in front of his troops. Eisenhower investigated the camp and called for extensive documentation of it, however, and did so mindfully, wishing to ensure that all possible evidence be gathered as a bulwark against potential future claims that the camps were fictive Allied propaganda. Here is how he put the matter in a letter to General George C. Marshall, dated April 15, 1945:

On a recent tour of the forward areas in the First and Third Armies, I stopped momentarily at the salt mines to take a look at the German treasure. There is a lot of it. But the most interesting – although horrible – sight that I encountered during the trip was a visit to a German internment camp Gotha. The things I saw beggar description. While I was touring the camp I encountered three men who had been inmates and by one ruse or another had made their escape. I interviewed them through an interpreter. The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were so overpowering as to leave me a bit sick. In one room, where they were piled up twenty or thirty naked men, killed by starvation, George Patton would not even enter. He said he would get sick if he did so. I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to “propaganda”.²

Somehow Eisenhower sensed that some people might later deny the radical evil of the Holocaust and he made every effort to ensure documentation of its horrors to prevent the success of such claims. The question remains, however, despite Eisenhower’s prescience, why do some deny the Shoah today?

Perhaps the third item that caught my attention this week provides a clue, a new biography of Roger Ailes, the chairman and CEO of Fox News. In an essay reviewing Gabriel Sherman’s volume in the current *New York Review of*

Books (April 3, 2014), Steve Coll reports that the author argues that Ailes has built a cable channel for a largely aging white male viewership that now earns its parent corporation, owned by Rupert Murdoch, approximately \$1 billion in profits each year—a 50 percent profit margin—by offering a personal, false and paranoid vision of America:

At seventy-two years old, wealthy and isolated, the Fox chief had apparently reached the conclusion that President Obama was driving the United States to ruin. Ailes therefore insisted that Fox News promote an idiosyncratic narrative of America in-danger. In this story, the country was beset by runaway government power, rising racial conflict, hostility toward Christianity, and out-of-control immigration.³

While not morally equivalent, what Holocaust deniers and avid devotees of Ailes' dark views have in common is their willingness to believe fantastical claims for which there is no evidence. Those arguing the Shoah did not occur and Ailes' audience are willing to suspend disbelief and to accept paranoid and conspiratorial visions and explanations of events and trends affecting them. There is no proof President Obama or immigrants are driving the nation to ruin and there is no substantiation for suggesting that the Nazis never murdered 6 million Jews. The stance of the anti-Semites, who are the bulk of Holocaust deniers, seems to be rooted in a credulous willingness to hate an "other" on the basis of stereotypes and fables that assign that group responsibility for all manner of imagined ills. The position of those willing to believe the dyspeptic Ailes' vision of the nation seems, too, to rest in a readiness to hate and to blame those reviled for a variety of alleged fears. Indeed, in both populations this willingness to adopt a deeply cruel and conspiratorial understanding seems ultimately to be constructed on utterly unfounded claims that substitute for the actual concerns vexing these individuals. Holocaust deniers target Jews for hate as a means to "explain" their own life prospects and standing. Ailes and those who have adopted his repulsive perspective blame the President of a different color, immigrants (many of whom also have a different complexion) and alleged revilers of the Christian faith for their fears. To adopt these positions apparently allows both groups to make sense of concerns that otherwise are difficult to address in their worldviews, while also providing each group "others" whom they may feel superior to and despise.

In short, Holocaust deniers and today's devoted supporters of Fox News both exhibit the apparently innate human capability to "other" viciously, regardless of the groundlessness of the assertions underpinning those claims. The lesson the Ailes example teaches is that entrepreneurs—read Rupert Murdoch in this instance—are willing to exploit this human penchant for profit. The broad political consequences of their efforts are a side product of their ongoing quest for riches. Deniers, meanwhile, force the analyst to confront the apparently limitless capacity of human beings blindly to hate. Both populations remind friends of democracy just how difficult it may be to sustain freedom when those empowered with keeping that flame burning so often evidence deeply powerful inclinations to extinguish it, and on rationales not linked to facts, but to fears, prejudices and brutish imaginings. Democracy poses a profound paradox: The same people who have so often demonstrated unbounded potential for just such behavior must discipline human capacity for evil, if self-governance is to survive.

(Originally published March 30, 2014)

Notes

¹ United States Holocaust Museum. 2014. Fundraising letter.

² Eisenhower, Dwight D. 1945. *Eisenhower Presidential Library online archives*. April 15. Available at: https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/holocaust/1945_04_15_DDE_to_Marshall.pdf.

³ Coll, Steve. 2014. "King of the Foxes," *New York Review of Books*, April 3. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/04/03/roger-ailes-king-of-foxes/>.

37 Privatism and its Discontents

I have been thinking and writing a good deal on the importance of empathy to democratic politics and to the preservation of freedom amongst heterogeneity in such societies. Our work here in the Institute takes me naturally to the topic as we study community change and democratization processes and work often with vulnerable populations, many of which are frequently the target of public discrimination and opprobrium (the poor, the drug addicted, the disabled or the incarcerated). Theoretically, as I have argued elsewhere, few concerns, human capacities or virtues are more central to the creation and maintenance of democratic institutions than empathy. So it is then, that I have become both interested in the topic and concerned about the state of what might be dubbed the collective willingness of our nation's citizens to imagine themselves a part of a community, especially one that includes individuals unlike themselves.

Most recently, I have become concerned about the turn in U.S. and several western European nations' politics that has found a share of leaders blaming with derision, if not outright loathing, specific subpopulations for difficult conditions in their countries in order to garner votes from groups supposedly wronged by those individuals. Some of these political parties and movements have taken vile hate-filled turns, as in France in the guise of the Front National party and in Italy via its Forza Nuova party. Others, as in the Republican legislative majorities in Arizona and Alabama and several other states, while less obviously targeting certain groups for outright racist or jingoistic venom as their European counterparts have done, have nonetheless launched attacks on immigrants, the poor, ethnic voters and seniors. As part of the national Republican Party's overall program, its U.S. leaders, including the chair of the House Budget committee, Rep. Paul Ryan, have demanded deep reductions in funding for the nation's anti-poverty programs and have called for changes in the poor's purportedly insufficient "culture" to address poverty in the United States. Conservative media figures, meanwhile, including Rush Limbaugh and Anne Coulter particularly, have issued attacks on poor women as being somehow alone responsible for the conditions in which they find themselves.

This is all occurring as Europe and this nation are experiencing historically slow economic growth post-recession and with the United States exhibiting

a poverty rate of 15 percent overall and 22 percent for its children. The U.S. is also presently not providing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families benefits to 74 percent of its poor families with children, despite the fact the program nominally exists to do just that. Meanwhile, wealth and income inequality have reached record highs in the United States, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) issued a staff report in February arguing that economic growth alone, especially at today's slow rates in the United States and many other nations, will not address these issues, and doing nothing to deal with deepening poverty and inequality will, in fact, likely make matters worse.¹ As the IMF paper's authors concluded,

First, inequality continues to be a robust and powerful determinant both of the pace of medium-term growth and of the duration of growth spells, even controlling for the size of redistributive transfers. ... It would still be a mistake to focus on growth and let inequality take care of itself, not only because inequality may be ethically undesirable but also because the resulting growth may be low and unsustainable.²

Amidst this gloomy economic and social scenario, GOP leaders have led efforts to block the use of government to ameliorate these conditions. In the last two years, that party has successfully thwarted the extension of long-term unemployment benefits, worked assiduously to prevent the provision of Medicaid to additional eligible individuals under the nation's new health care law in nearly all states in which it holds a majority, sought to reduce federal expenditures in programs that assist the poor, including securing recent significant reductions in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the nation's principal initiative aimed at hunger and food insecurity. More generally, the Party fought efforts to create a federal stimulus package to address the recent recession and blocked continuation of any such effort once it had run its initial course, despite the persisting relative weakness of the overall economy. The GOP has also imposed harsh anti-immigration laws in several states and stymied immigration reform in Congress. A consensus of America's economists has suggested these steps have worsened economic conditions materially for all Americans and especially for those already suffering from unemployment or poverty by the equivalent of 1-1.5 percentage points of growth.

Interestingly, many of the arguments the Republican Party has advanced in support of these policy positions have not rested on specific economic or empirical evidence concerning programmatic claims, but instead on abstract arguments or ideological assumptions, such as the claims that providing health care access to the poor would deprive them of their freedom to choose policies of their liking (without noting they do not have insurance now), that the poor misuse their food support benefits because of a culture of lassitude, that the long-term unemployed are not really looking for work because their benefits are keeping them too comfortable, that voter fraud requires strong identification measures at polling places and that immigrants are “stealing” other Americans’ jobs.

In all of these cases, the Republican policy argument has rested on broad negative contentions regarding what someone is doing “to” citizens: “taking” their jobs, “taking advantage” of their kind support (the poor and unemployed), “taking unfair (and illegal) advantage” at the polls and so on. The GOP has also justified on similar grounds its wider critique of the federal government and of governance. The Republican Party has argued for decades that the nation should not provide Social Security or Medicare on the nonconcrete assertion that these programs impose unneeded restrictions on personal choice or interfere unduly with the market or both. In this argument, the “other” is the government and governance itself, which is typically criticized in favor of a theorized perfect market alternative. In short, the GOP has for many years set up dichotomies concerning policies it dislikes and attacked their beneficiaries or the government that provides them as somehow alien or apart from “us,” labeling them “others” who take unfair advantage of our support through alleged waste, fraud or abuse. That is, Republican government officials have “othered” the government they serve in order to undermine support for programs and policies of which they do not approve.

All of this has consequences for the citizens who listen to this rhetoric, a share of whom have come to believe that the government over which they are sovereign is not their own or is “taking” their resources to serve those among them who are contemptible and should be distrusted, whether specific groups or the government itself. That is, these arguments conduce to social distrust and to a slow enervation of empathy among the populace. With that process comes a weakening of support for and understanding of the need to maintain the common or broader community via governance processes in order to secure freedom itself. As marketization of society and

of much of the state continues unrelentingly, citizens are offered the option of retreat into privatism even as they are encouraged not to empathize with a large swathe of their fellow Americans or to support democratic decision processes. This seems to be a neat description of what is happening among many in the United States today as their distrust of their own governments and their scapegoating of specific subgroups of the population continues to rise.

Whether one blames the nation's present pass on widespread fear of a continuation of worsening economic conditions among the working and middle classes, policies that have exacerbated that situation or the fact that our political parties today are quite sophisticated in their appeals to humankind's innate emotions and willingness to "other" to make sense of otherwise opaque situations to garner votes, the result, here and abroad, has been the same: the slow collapse of empathy in the polity, encouraged by a share of its own elected leaders. There are few long-term trends more significant for the health of freedom in our polity and that of other democratic nations, and therefore of more moment for our work here in the Institute, than this one. We are witnessing the unfolding of a political paradox for the ages: the possibility of freedom slowly despoiled by the dedication of a share of democracy's own leaders to a flawed ideology tied to an effective machinery of electoral mobilization.

(Originally published April 1, 2014)

Notes

¹ Ostry, Jonathan, Andrew Berg, Charalambos Tsangarides. 2014.

"Redistribution, Inequality, and Growth. IMF Staff Discussion Note."

International Monetary Fund, April. Available at: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2014/sdn1402.pdf>.

² Ostry et al., "Redistribution, Inequality, and Growth," p. 25.

38 On the Uses and Misuses of Rhetoric

The Greek philosopher Socrates is famous for suggesting, among other likely apocryphal, aphorisms, “The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.”¹ In any case, when one follows that great figure through his student Plato’s famous *Dialogues*, one quickly learns that the sage was not arguing for “know-nothingism,” but for its reverse, a dedicated, passionate, life-long and humble pursuit of wisdom for its own sake. Socrates more than once patiently undid pompously certain or manipulative individuals in exchanges with them, including the rhetorician Gorgias, his student Polus and finally, and most importantly, the Athenian gentleman, Callicles in Plato’s *The Gorgias*.² As he debated each of these individuals concerning the relative roles and merits of rhetoric in that Dialogue, Socrates established that the art of communication may degrade rather than ennoble those who practice it, particularly when the rhetorician’s aim is to employ that art to garner power or riches for themselves. As he talked with his three interlocutors in *The Gorgias*, Socrates moved their conversation into a deeper reflection on the nature of the good and evil inhering in humankind. In conversing with Callicles particularly, the philosopher completely discredited the pursuit of power and riches for their own sakes and persuaded the Athenian to admit, to his great consternation, that rhetoric harnessed for such purposes is both personally and socially corrosive and worse.

As Socrates made these points in *The Gorgias*, he suggested how pernicious empty pursuit of power can be while also pointing to abidingly important questions about human behavior and expectations of political life. The philosopher’s sometimes pointed probing of Gorgias as well as that rhetorician’s pupil and sponsor offer several lessons for those active in American politics today. I sketch three very briefly here: the imperative need for intellectual and moral humility to secure the possibility for knowledge and free human interaction, the profound individual and social degradation and loss of freedom that can result from the misuse of the power that inheres in rhetoric, and the often painful political consequences of embracing certainties where none exist, especially when these result in dogma or fundamentalisms of various stripes.

Socrates sought early in *The Gorgias* to remind his conversation partners of their grotesque, almost comedic, vanity. Not one of the trio with whom the thinker interacted could imagine that their positions were not the height of intelligence and perspicacity. The philosopher's burden was to expose what their conceit meant for their positions and how they viewed their fellow human beings. Socrates carefully demonstrated to each individual that rhetoric unlinked to truth seeking and knowledge was empty and often cruel, and that their certainties led not to thoughtfulness, but to boasting and brokenness. More, their false sureness led to arrogance and an abiding belief in their own wisdom and standing, and especially in their capacity to persuade their fellow citizens to their views to advance their own pride, power and place.

All of these attributes Socrates deliberately, and sometimes scathingly, showed to be utterly hollow and destructive for those employing them, for those abused (and used) by these arts and for the broader society. Narcissism results not only in personal arrogance and shame, but also social corrosion. For Socrates, while knowledge can certainly be precise, one must ever be open to the possibility that it may be overturned by newfound insights and be humbled by that fact in one's quest for wisdom and in how one treats others. One key lesson of *The Gorgias* is that he or she who would be wise must also be humble and that seeking knowledge demands tolerance. Another message of this Dialogue is that vanity degrades its purveyor even when, perhaps especially when, the individual can ply their skills successfully (i.e., persuades the listener or viewer of their perspective even when that point-of-view may not redound to that person's interests). Manipulation of another human being, successful or not, damages profoundly the dignity of both the individual undertaking it as well as the target.

It is hardly a stretch to note that today's equivalent of the rhetoricians depicted in *The Gorgias* are political consultants who are hired for the sole purpose of persuading enough of the relevant voting electorate to choose their employer to allow that individual to gain power via an election. The metric for most of those in this industry is whether their candidates succeed or "win." In fact, future contracts depend largely on these consultants being perceived as "winners" in just this sense. With so low a bar for practice it is no surprise that each election season brings fresh revelations of how one or another campaign consultant pressed completely untruthful or inflammatory claims to "support" their candidate.

Such rhetoric is empty in just the way that Socrates warned it could be dangerous so many years ago; it can become untethered to anything but a relentless quest for power and individual gain. Given this concern, it is noteworthy that our polity's politics no longer is yoked to political consultants only during campaigns, but for daily governance choices as well. Each political party offers daily talking points for its partisans aimed solely at persuasion for perceived partisan advantage, as do countless advocacy groups, and these often bear too little relationship to the facts of the policy challenges at hand, but are instead crafted to mobilize specific voters or to seek to persuade others to support an alternate perspective by whatever claims may appear to "work." In addition to not always being linked to real, as opposed to salient, concerns, these statements frequently also trend to the fantastical, as when several GOP Senators recently sought to blame President Obama for Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to occupy the Crimea militarily. This example is fresh, but new ones occur daily and they illustrate the dangers of disconnecting rhetoric from any substantive ethical claims in efforts to mobilize for advantage to garner power. Pursuit of power for its own sake is always dangerous and that is true in democratic societies, too, particularly when it leads officials to adopt strategies that "other" groups or entire populations, or otherwise manipulate hearers or viewers to take stands against preserving the freedom and rights of all.

A third lesson one may take from *The Gorgias* for today's U.S. politics is the danger in using rhetoric to offer the public false certainties. Our politics is rife with officials—both elected and those who would be—willing to offer up all manner of supposed certitudes to voters feeling insecure as a result of rapid globalization, a deep recession and slow economic growth that is leaving many groups behind. In so fear-filled a context, would-be democratic leaders confront an electorate yearning for explanations and "fixes" for their perceived woes and leaders may be tempted to provide voters all sorts of deceptive targets for concern as a way to gain their votes. We have seen just such strategies employed in recent years by candidates and officials willing to blame government for a range of social and political problems, including, in fact, sluggish economic growth. Other leaders have argued similarly that the poor constitute a cancerous tumor on the body politic and their laziness and moral degradation is the cause of much wider woes. Still others have asserted that immigrants constitute a threat to employment for Americans and that religious freedom is under assault (there is no real evidence for either contention). In all of these cases, those campaigning

for office have offered voters rhetoric characterized by unbridled claims and simple-seeming “certainties” that allege someone or something is responsible for what are, in fact, complicated multi-causal realities. Each such initiative launched by political leaders and their consultants comes replete with the dangers implicit in unleashing “othering” of either the government or specific groups. There is now ample evidence that these sorts of claims can mobilize a share of voters, but as Socrates wisely realized, such rhetoric often results in and feeds fundamentalist claims and imagined certainties that permit their purveyors to dismiss other groups in society or to blame those individuals for all manner of woes, resulting ultimately in the degradation or loss of freedom among both those targeted and those abusing them. False certainties tied to emotive claims concerning the moral inadequacies of those blamed constitute an especially surefire fast track to tyranny. At their worst, these sorts of social contentions have resulted in the horrors of the Holocaust, the Killing Fields of Cambodia and the Rwandan genocide, among too many other examples to recount. It is hardly too soon to sound the alarm that a share of our national rhetoric today has taken on a vicious and malignant tone that appears untethered to any claim, but the pursuit of power. History teaches that such rhetoric is dangerous for freedom.

(Originally published April 7, 2014)

Notes

¹ Bowden, Hugh. 2005. *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle: Divination and Democracy*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

² Plato. 380 BC, 1952. *The Gorgias*, (William Clark Helmbold, translator). New York: The Bobbs-Merrill, Company, Inc.

39 On Fear, Killing, Torture and Rationalization

By any measure, this week's juxtaposition of events was poignant. Rwanda and the world community began a 100-day commemoration of that nation's horrific genocidal campaign 25 years ago that saw approximately 800,000-1,000,000 (mostly) Tutsis systematically hunted and murdered in an orchestrated campaign by militias of the Hutu tribe. Meanwhile, in the United States, the Senate Intelligence Committee voted to release the executive summary, conclusions and dissenting views sections of a major investigation into the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) use of rendition and torture during the George W. Bush administration, 2001-2008. The Committee report accuses the CIA of misleading that administration and Congress concerning the reach of its activities and their efficacy. Meanwhile, in a very public spat, the Agency has argued the Senate Committee report is itself misrepresentative and factually inaccurate. President Barack Obama has asked the CIA to lead the review of which elements of the document may be declassified per the Senate's demand, while protecting national security. One might wonder if the President's action will find the fox guarding the henhouse. It will be interesting to watch this drama unfold in coming days.

What is already clear from what is well known, however, is the intentional planning and malice of forethought that went into the Agency's torture-related activities during the Bush presidency. Regardless of how one interprets the current controversy with Congress, it is plain that then Vice President Dick Cheney strongly supported the torture and rendition project, as he continues publicly to defend such efforts today and to denounce forcefully any and all who might disagree. For this reason, America's descent into torture may not simply be dismissed as a rogue Agency's leaders' responsibility, irrespective of how arguments concerning the Senate investigation are resolved. That is, as abhorrent as our nation's use of physical and psychological suffering was during this dark period in our history, that chapter's unfolding is similar in one vital respect to the Rwandan genocide we now also recall: both were meticulously planned and every effort was taken to keep the origins of each mysterious and secret. While the Rwandan genocide was purportedly sparked by a military attack on an aircraft carrying the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, who died in

the assault, it is still not known with certainty who perpetrated that effort and whether its execution was as transparently cynical as it now appears, so as to justify the launch of the killings. Likewise, it remains uncertain who first pressed for the United States to employ torture counter to its international treaty obligations, the wishes of its military leaders and its Constitutional premises. As with the deaths of the Rwanda and Burundi leaders, this element in the quest for accountability in the U.S. case remains opaque. Moreover, America systematically sought to conduct its torture efforts on foreign soil so as to separate these activities from clear United States complicity.

Apart from considering the secrecy with which the Rwandan campaign and America's foray into torture were planned, while watching videos and reading stories this week concerning the east African nation's genocide I have been struck by three stark realities of that epic tragedy that have broader implications. First, relatively few of the known leaders of the campaign have been brought to justice to date. There is controversy concerning why, but only a small number of those who led the effort have been prosecuted. Second, it is more than notable that so many Tutsi Rwandans who survived the 100 days have found ways to live today beside those known to have killed members of their families, including spouses, children and siblings. This fact is an extraordinary testament to the strength and will of those who have forgiven and otherwise reconciled themselves to the most heinous actions imaginable and, in a share of cases at least, to the genuine repentance of those involved in the killings. Finally, one of the knottiest issues associated with mass murder (indiscriminate murder of men, women and children on the basis of some characteristic—in this case their tribal affiliation) is how those undertaking such horrors rationalized them.

In interviews in recent days, Rwandan perpetrators have offered a variety of grounds for their willingness to participate in the killings, but three stand out for me. First, the genocide's orchestrators systematically engaged in a campaign designed to convince those on whom they would rely to realize their plans that the Tutsi people—all Tutsi people, even close friends, neighbors and family members—were to be feared because they had designs on the property and equal standing of all Hutus. This claim was both essential and central to convincing so many to cooperate in such vicious acts. At bottom, killers were told that the ends justified the means. One had

to rid the earth of these evildoers, per se, to be safe. Security and well-being justified unbridled brutality.

Second, Hutu hunters report being told over and over again that those whom they were to attack were less than human. Planners called on Hutus to find the “cockroaches” and exterminate them from the earth. Now repentant killers report being “brainwashed” by such claims, which daily issued from incessant radio broadcasts. Those constant harangues sought both to instill fear and to convince listeners that those they were being called upon to kill were not really human and so their deaths should be regarded with no more thought than one might accord the death of an insect pest.

Finally, those who have publicly repented their actions in Rwanda and been granted at least some measure of forgiveness by survivors whose lives they so grievously affected, have reported deep concerns regarding rightful retribution on return to their villages, even when they had served prison terms. Many, in short, had come to realize the heinousness of their acts, but struggled to ask for forgiveness out of continued fear of revenge.

While the United States government certainly did not conduct genocide in its campaign of torture during the Bush presidency, the arguments that administration employed to justify those acts and the denial of due process and Geneva Convention rights to prisoners are eerily similar to those used in Rwanda. First, while contested strongly by many, Cheney has argued repeatedly that America’s secret torture of a share of its prisoners was justified by the terrorist threat confronting the nation. That is, the end justified the means. Plainly, we desired information to protect our population and the supposition was that captured individuals could provide just such, and, therefore, that any and all actions could be undertaken in the name of that aspiration. The dangers of this sort of reasoning are now evident in the present case, but more generally, have been well known for eons. Many in the CIA, Cheney and others, including, ultimately, President Bush, were willing to sacrifice the nation’s international obligations and its deepest principles and to order the most despicable of acts on the basis of a rationalized necessity.

Second, the “ends justify the means” explanation rested on a claim very similar to that operative in the Rwandan case. One ought to recall that we were and remained a nation under threat of terrorist acts in the post-September 11, 2001 era, Cheney has repeatedly said, and to allay that fear, the government was justified in taking unprecedented steps to address that challenge. In this view, there were “Good Guys” and “Bad Guys,” and those who dubbed themselves superior were justified in taking whatever actions

they perceived expedient, however unlawful or cruel, in efforts to allay their concerns.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that the undergirding justification for torture for the Bush-Cheney administration was fear. Notably, those calling on Hutus to kill their fellow Tutsi countrymen also appealed to fear as a central rationale for their genocidal crusade.

Interestingly, none of these arguments and justifications was new in historical terms. What is still fresh is the scope of tragedy they unleashed in Rwanda, and how deeply their employ in the case of the CIA's use of torture undermined American ideals, freedom and standing in the world. While different in scale and character, in each of these cases the resulting human suffering was profound and its long-term implications large and often unforeseen. And in each case, too, age-old appeals to basic and lamentable human characteristics or capacities yielded horrific results. Finally, the continued rationalization of these repulsive acts by a share of those complicit in them in both nations should give all individuals of good will pause. The question they raise goes deeper than misguided people making malevolent claims, to the issue of whether we can ever find ways and means to overcome these recurring dark episodes of human cruelty in our own and other nations.

(Originally published April 13, 2014)

40 Pondering Human Dignity, Democracy and Freedom

This week Frazier Glenn Miller, a long-time leader of far-right paramilitary hate groups, allegedly killed three individuals at a Jewish Community Center and retirement home in Overland Park, Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City, Missouri. The day after the shootings, law enforcement officials branded the killings a hate crime. In response to the attacks, columnist Frank Bruni of *The New York Times* provided an overview of the latest Federal Bureau of Investigation statistics on reported hate crimes in the United States.¹ In 2012, the latest year for which information is available, that agency formally reported 6,573 such incidents (few doubt many more went unreported) and the largest share were linked to race, while fully 65 percent of the 20 percent of the total tied to religion were products of anti-Semitism.

Among other examples of discrimination against Jews, Bruni cited one recent and especially ugly series of incidents in upstate New York in which three Jewish families filed suit against a school district because students there had harassed their children for a protracted period with persistent bullying, Nazi salutes and swastikas drawn on their desks. Bruni reported the system's superintendent responded to the families with an investigation and statements of concern, but the official also noted in an email message to the youths' parents that, "Your expectations for changing inbred prejudice may be a bit unrealistic."² *The Times* had reported earlier (November 7, 2013) the following comments by the school district leader, who also is Jewish, on the badgering students' behavior:

Mr. Steinberg, in interviews, said he asked the parents who had sued why they chose Pine Bush. 'I said to them, If being Jewish is so important to you, why would you move into a community that does not have a synagogue?'

'If you want your kids to hang out with more Jewish children or have more tolerance,' he added, 'why would you pick a community like Pine Bush?'³

The school leader's reaction to this incident raises the reasonable question of why where families may live should be determined by the hate-mongering

of others, even as it suggests just how pervasive this sort of behavior and discrimination can be. This episode and the Overland Park killings are instructive not only for what they say about the enduring character of such enmities and their too easy rationalization by too many, but also for the ways they highlight the fact that such appeals are once more being employed, covertly and more obviously, in our broader political dialogue.

Unfortunately, the same sort of failure to act aggressively to tamp down hatred that characterized Superintendent Steinberg's actions, and to go further than that school official did not only to tolerate, but also to seek to take advantage of such animus, is increasingly characterizing a share of our national politics. Consider, for example, the stance that nine GOP controlled statehouses have taken to date to limit access to the polls for African Americans, other minority group members, the poor more generally and many seniors by imposing new and onerous voter identification requirements on the basis of what is, in fact, non-existent fraud. Party leaders have taken this step to undermine a share of Americans' voting rights in an ongoing effort to ensure continued GOP majorities (i.e., political power) in the relevant states. It is also clear, however, that many Republican officials genuinely believe that those they seek to prevent from voting represent pariahs who are "less than" American because members of the "wrong" race, ethnicity, poor or vulnerable.

This was the purport of 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney's infamous campaign speech concerning the imagined "taker" character of those who do not vote for the GOP and it has underpinned each new Republican Party federal budget plan that Representative Paul Ryan (the party's nominal leader on such matters) has presented during the last year. Every such effort has been constructed on the assumption of massive reductions in support for the vulnerable in American society, including the poor and those confronting food insecurity and hunger, especially. To come to the stance that each has articulated, Romney and Ryan had first to conclude that those they targeted for othering were "less than" themselves and not deserving of equal treatment with dignity.

In one more example of how social assumptions that discriminate are driving a share of the politics of today's GOP, Governor Mary Fallin of Oklahoma this week signed into law a bill forbidding that state's cities from establishing any mandatory minimum wage and employee benefits, including vacation and sick leave days. Accounts of the politics of the move suggest the state's Republican-controlled legislature sought to preempt any

effort toward creation of an increased minimum wage level such as that now being pressed by President Barack Obama on grounds it is not needed and would prove unduly costly to the state's businesses. While many would dispute these arguments, what is indisputable is that according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, "In 2012, Oklahoma's proportion of hourly paid workers earning at or below the prevailing federal minimum wage ranked third highest among the 50 states and the District of Columbia."⁴ The Bureau also reported that 7.2 percent of the hourly paid workers in Oklahoma earned the federal minimum wage or less, compared with 4.7 percent nationally. In short, this is not a state in which businesses need to be protected by government action from paying their employees undue wages.

Instead, what seems to be at play here is an imaginary that those working for such compensation "deserve" no more and that no more should be asked of profit-seeking firms, even if their employees' compensation is such that many can work full-time and be unable to support themselves and their families. Oklahoma's majority party leaders are willing to imagine only that when such occurs, it is the responsibility of the employee alone.

What these examples and perspectives have in common is a willingness among those articulating them to accord themselves superior standing to those demeaned and, as a corollary in several instances, to argue that those targeted are in fact "less than" other Americans or human beings or both. The GOP routinely and often explicitly has sought both in principle and as a mobilization device to contend that all who are poor and vulnerable are too lazy to be otherwise and are therefore undeserving of public interest and support.

While how leaders use scapegoating tactics and appeals to voter fears and prejudice to mobilize individuals to the polls is certainly important, I believe these examples suggest something more profound for those interested in maintaining free and democratic institutions. At root and in principle, freedom demands that all those dubbed "citizens" be accorded equal rights by the regime. There is no room in such claims for "exception clauses" for those of the "incorrect" race, ethnicity, religion, income level or other delimiting factor. There is no provision, either, that requires that citizen rights be abrogated for some who are permitted to reside only where they will not experience hatred or cruel discrimination. Increasingly, however, for a complex array of reasons, a share of our nation's political leaders are willing to fan popular prejudices and intolerance if it results in power, or to label

wide swathes of the nation's population undeserving on grounds of their poverty or skin color or other characteristic if it provides political benefits.

It should be obvious that if this trend continues and additional steps are taken to punish those defined as “less than,” the nation will have embarked on a slide to the potential complete usurpation of claims to equality on the basis of humanity and instead will have begun to assign fully equal status only to those possessing specific economic means, or who happen to be members of a certain race, religion, ethnicity or class. While philosophers continue to debate how best to define the relationship between human rights and human dignity, I am content to contend here that all people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect for no other reason than their standing as persons. For freedom and democracy to endure we cannot first demand that citizens be wealthy or of a preferred race, religion, ethnicity or class. To the extent many of our leaders today are in practice violating this foundational principle, they are daily undermining the nation's prospects for the preservation of freedom and equality before the law and in daily life. One may only hope the people united will soon demand a change in this course or, failing that, that these leaders themselves will sense the dangers for freedom and equality that the trend their quest for power has unleashed.

(Originally published April 20, 2014)

Notes

¹ Bruni, Frank. 2014. “The oldest hatred, forever young,” *The New York Times*, April 14. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/15/opinion/the-oldest-hatred-forever-young.html>.

² Bruni, “The Oldest hatred.”

³ Weiser, Benjamin. 2013. “Swastikas, slurs and torment in town's schools,” *The New York Times*, November 7. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/08/nyregion/swastikas-slurs-and-torment-in-towns-schools.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁴ Blow, Charles M. 2014. “Minimum wage, maximum outrage,” *The New York Times*, April 16. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/17/opinion/minimum-wage-maximum-outrage.html>.

41 Fighting Poverty and Banning Books

It is one of those curious coincidences that are nonetheless powerful when they occur. This month marked the 75th anniversary of the publication of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.¹ The now iconic novel recounts the tale of the Joad family's trials as they sought to escape the Oklahoma Dust Bowl for the potential, but ultimately relentlessly cruel, prosperity of California. The book won the Pulitzer Prize soon after its publication, became a quick and perennial bestseller, produced a similarly classic film and emerged as one of the most acclaimed American texts of the 20th century. Despite its power and praise, *The Grapes of Wrath* has also earned the ire of many since its publication and now is on lists of most frequently banned books in the United States. Its subject, poverty, and its often searing and unflinching lens into the avarice and greed of which humans are capable (in this case, when taking advantage of the already destitute), is intense and for some individuals at least, fearsome and unpopular.

Meanwhile, January marked the 50th anniversary of President Lyndon Johnson's declaration of war on poverty. The poor he had in mind as emblematic were the same individuals whose plight so moved his predecessor, John Kennedy: those living in rural Appalachia. Johnson undertook to assist those "good people," as he labeled them on a tour of the region in early 1964. The visit began a sustained effort to rid the nation of horrific destitution. In soaring rhetoric that surely fit his high aspirations, the President called on the nation to unite to eradicate the scourge of privation:

For the first time in our history, an America without hunger is a practical prospect and it must, it just simply must become the urgent business of all men and women of every race and every religion and every region. We have declared unconditional war on poverty. Our objective is total victory.²

Johnson's War on Poverty resulted in passage of the Medicare and Medicaid programs as well as the Food Stamp program, the school free-and-reduced-price meals initiative and many more efforts aimed at assisting the

poor. These together helped to lift hundreds of thousands out of poverty, provided hope for countless others and ameliorated the suffering of millions more. But for all of the good they have done, these national programs ultimately did not eliminate poverty or hunger in Appalachia or elsewhere in our otherwise rich nation. Now, however, the spirit of comity, hope and unity the President sought to unleash, and on which he relied to create the efforts begun in its name, are under nearly continuous attack from a furious conservative movement that portrays those initiatives as the products of an overreaching government and argues that each deprives individuals of freedom of choice, or saps their will to work or both.

As I have noted in recent columns, Representative Paul Ryan has served recently as the Republican Party's spokesperson in sustained (and partly successful, regarding food stamps) calls for reducing or eliminating these initiatives. The party has also worked assiduously to prevent expansion of Medicaid under the aegis of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, in the name of ensuring that citizens bear the "real" risks of their situations as they confront daily privation, and not see their incentive to seek employment compromised by supposed undue social support. The contention underpinning this ongoing campaign is that individuals should confront the vicissitudes of the market alone and if they falter in so doing for whatever reasons, the responsibility for that outcome must be counted theirs alone. Their fellow citizens owe them little or nothing in their adversity. They are imagined to be the sole architects of their fates.

This same assumption has been the basis of many criticisms of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The book has been burned and banned on the grounds that it calls for communism because it dared criticize the behavior of predatory commercial actors. Such has been viewed as "Un-American" in critics' minds because the behavior of the market and market interests should be beyond question. Any interrogation of such assumptions cannot be countenanced and therefore its agent—in this instance, a book—must be silenced. Interestingly, as with today's GOP claims, the harshest criticisms have often been leveled at those experiencing suffering, while little or nothing is said or acknowledged about how the relevant conditions that created the poor's penury arose in the first instance. To the extent those are acknowledged, they are considered the responsibility of the individual afflicted. To suggest the economic structure or its actors might bear a share of responsibility, as Steinbeck did, is to raise the unthinkable, in this view. Such heresy must therefore be stopped before it can spread.

As it happens, *New York Times* reporters currently are revisiting many of the localities whose poverty so moved President Johnson 50 years ago and are finding that many residents remain quite poor. There is surely much less outright hunger and physical suffering in McDowell County, West Virginia today, for example, than in 1964, but the market has not been kind to that jurisdiction or its citizenry in the period since the President's visit. Now, as then, coal is the county's only real source of employment and jobs in mining have declined for decades with continued mechanization, and now also fierce competition from other fuel sources in the global marketplace. Indeed, fewer than 1 in 3 remaining McDowell County residents are in the labor force and many who are not suffer from prescription medicine addiction. Put simply, there are few jobs for which to compete and little hope among many who continue to make the area their home that their situation will change. Republicans decry this reality and argue it demonstrates the failure of the War on Poverty, saying that instead of helping those it aimed to serve, it has instead discouraged them from seeking employment.

Most dispassionate analysts are less inclined to blame the government's assistance efforts for the county's woes or those now suffering as the architects of their own continuing adversity. These scholars instead see McDowell County's continuing poverty as the consequence of long-term global economic change coupled with inadequate public and private willingness to invest psychologically and economically in possible alternatives to dependence solely on coal. In short, the ongoing crisis is not a failure of the poor because they are culturally lacking, as Ryan has recently suggested, or the result of assistance efforts that deprived the impoverished of their willingness to work, as Republicans also contend. Instead, the core reality confronting this area's population, like that of many other rural jurisdictions across the United States, is the changing market for the commodity the region offers and Appalachia's inability to generate economic alternatives to assume the place of that product. Without capitalist interest to locate in the area's difficult geography, with its unevenly developed infrastructure and workforce, no new alternatives to coal have emerged for many of these communities. As coal-related employment has continued to decline, the result is hollowed out towns and counties. Residents who remain are increasingly dependent on public support to stave off utter deprivation. Many have fallen prey to drug addiction, a sign of the collapse of their traditional social support structure as well as of their relative hopelessness.

None of the origins of this complex constellation of factors can fairly be said to be the result of public efforts to fight misery and deprivation. Indeed, such initiatives continue to represent the only hope and sustenance for many residents. However ideologically convenient it may be for those who wish to attack government to say so, public efforts to combat destitution are not the cause of poverty in Appalachia or elsewhere. This raises the question of why so many people wish to pretend this is so, even when it results in additional or deepened direct suffering for those so maligned.

I am not sure I can supply a definitive answer. What seems clear is that this is a difficult and enduringly important concern in a polity so devoted to the market as our own. It goes to the heart of whether we shall be a self-governing nation or one that pays obeisance instead to a romanticized vision of the market as panacea and imagined substitute for democratic governance. Governments must create the conditions for markets to function and must regulate them to ensure they operate freely and fairly. When they do not, as in the Joad family's experience in Steinbeck's fictionalized account of what were very real experiences for hundreds of thousands, a democratic government must hold those committing injurious acts accountable, not blame those victimized. A self-governing citizenry can and should debate actively how to balance ensuring space for market innovation and monitoring it for excesses and injustice. Nonetheless, it is folly to pretend that citizens or their representatives can evade their governance responsibility by worshipping a non-existent market ideal or by attacking efforts to assist others as a matter of (gravely misplaced) principle. These stands can only result in still more suffering while also degrading the possibility of democratic governance. The real exigencies of poverty are complex, and a mature people can and must address that reality and not pretend that those experiencing privation are its singular agents.

(Originally published April 27, 2014)

Notes

¹ Steinbeck, John. 1939. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Viking Books.

² Johnson, Lyndon B. 1964. "Annual message to Congress on the State of the Union, January 8." *The American Presidency Project*. Available at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26787>.

42 A Disquieting Enervation of Democratic Possibility

Economist and columnist Paul Krugman has recently argued that the GOP-controlled House Energy and Commerce Committee released a deliberately misleading report concerning implementation of the nation's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act last week in order to accord with its members' ideological claims concerning the widely trumpeted "failure" of that effort.¹ Other analysts who have studied the survey on which the report was based agree with Krugman's conclusion. One may interpret this turn by these House officials several ways, but all are disturbing, for they suggest that a share of our nation's elected leaders have so lost their way as to use artfully created propaganda (for it must be so labeled) to mobilize and mislead their party adherents and American citizens in the face of contrary empirical conditions and facts.

One might contend that these leaders did not lie so much as seek to present data that would appear to support their ideological views, irrespective of the facts. Alternately, one might simply agree with Krugman that this effort reveals a party now so reckless and so driven by ardent hatred of the President and of government action per se as to trumpet claims in the name of its beliefs that bear no relationship to reality. That is, adopting this viewpoint, one would suggest that Republican leaders are now willing to lie to press their beliefs and to use the media and well-coordinated press releases, sound bites and interviews by stalwart Party members to ensure that their claims receive wide attention as framed. In this view, the GOP is seeking to control public perceptions by distributing profoundly misleading contentions and repeating them ad nauseum. Since that advocacy is deliberately disingenuous, it cannot be said to seek to inform, but only to persuade and to do so without ethical foundation.

This is all very unsettling if you care about democracy and self-governance, for it appears to cross the line from partisan advocacy into a new territory of propagandizing to persuade citizens of that which is not true and is deliberately calculated to mislead and to create an understanding of reality that bears no relationship to actual conditions. History suggests in countless examples that this is demagoguery and it represents dangerous ground for any polity. When this trend is coupled with ongoing GOP

willingness to single out specific groups as “insufficient” in various ways, this trend becomes still more unsettling and concerning.

James Madison and Alexander Hamilton famously argued in *The Federalist* that America’s elected officials would be prevented from such behavior both by means of periodic elections and by their desire to be regarded well in history.² However, today’s politics may allow neither of these checks to function as the Founders envisioned. Gerrymandered districts have removed much of the power of the electoral check on rabidly ideological or partisan legislators, and slavish ideological devotion, coupled with an increasingly disaffected and often conspiracy-oriented GOP voter base, have resulted in a party ideology that now appears to be breaking down the second check on officials’ behavior, too. What remains is a space in which these political leaders may act with impunity so long as their actions accord with their electoral base’s expectations. Judging from their collective behavior, many officials in the Party now appear to have chosen to take advantage of this opportunity and have dismissed all anchoring propositions other than actions that either conduce to their ideological disposition or to whipping up their already disaffected voter coalition, or both.

Paradoxically, this situation leaves the United States increasingly in the same sort of parlous and perilous state regarding our governance that many developing nations now confront, although our own course to this pass has been completely voluntary and rooted in electoral mobilization strategies and uniquely American cultural norms and values, rather than, say, arising from a transition from previous dictatorial rule. I think of the difficult scenario now unfolding in Myanmar, for example, which has seen substantial democratic reform and economic growth since its 2010 general election and the freeing of Aung San Suu Kyi after many years of confinement, while it also has witnessed unprecedented and unchecked violence against its Muslim minority, the Rohingya, in a western province in recent months.

While many of these Rohingya families have lived in Myanmar for generations, they are widely despised by the nation’s more numerous Buddhists, and in December, a key city in which many of this group reside saw widespread, systematic murderous attacks on its Muslim population. Indeed, given its scale and apparently careful design, some analysts have labeled the rampage genocide.³ What I find notable is that a minority was singled out for violence while government officials did little to stop it. Those same leaders, meanwhile, used calls by the opposition party to curb the violence as a mechanism to portray that group as “Muslim lovers,” so as to

appeal to the prejudices of many voters. This sort of willful manipulation of reality to accord with voter fears and bigotry appears to be undermining the possibility of true democratization in Myanmar, even as it results in the continuing suffering and deprivation of rights for a share of the nation's population. Meanwhile, the cynicism implicit in such posturing by the officials practicing it is sickening.

Sadly, the behavior of a share of our own nation's officials is increasingly similar. We have many citizens who do not understand how their regime works and who are otherwise unwilling to countenance reality, evidencing instead a fear-filled, willful and paranoia-tinged ignorance that makes them susceptible to carefully crafted rhetorical claims designed to raise their ire and angst. This sort of strategy may work in the short term as it sends some voters to the polls in a bitter frenzy, but perversely, it signals a breakdown in democratic accountability and a disquieting split between citizens and leaders in which the latter now are curiously willing to embrace falsehoods in the name of "representing" the people. The result is not representation that encourages deliberation, so necessary for self-governance, but instead a slow unraveling of any real ties between electoral claims and reality. That such rhetoric, when false and ill-intentioned, constitutes demagoguery that often appeals to the worst in citizens to secure or maintain power, only makes this situation more unnerving and potentially explosive. In this sense, the governance situations in Myanmar and the U.S. are too similar for comfort.

As I write, it is difficult to be optimistic that this trend can soon be reversed in the United States. Multiple recent polls reveal many Americans to be uninformed generally about key issues confronting their nation, uneducated concerning how and why their polity was designed and increasingly disaffected from government following decades of deadening attacks concerning the purported evils of self-governance. All of these trends appear to be converging to create a space in which officials interested only in power, or perhaps with so avid a belief in their ideological frame that they cannot countenance contrary empirical realities, now have gained space and currency to press rhetoric and advocate for views that are not only not true, but are positively pernicious for self-governance. One may hope Krugman and others will serve as canaries in the proverbial coal mine and succeed in turning broad and much-needed attention to this difficult turn in our politics.

(Originally published May 12, 2014)

Notes

¹ Krugman, Paul. 2014. "Inventing a Failure," *The New York Times*, May 5. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/05/opinion/krugman-inventing-a-failure.html>.

² Hamilton, Alexander; James Madison; John Jay. 1887. *The Federalist: A collection of essays, written in favour of the New Constitution, as agreed upon by the Federal Convention*. New York: J&A McLean.

³ Bin Uzayr, Sufyan. 2014. "Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing of the Rohingya People in Myanmar," *Foreign Policy Journal*, January 29. Available at: <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2014/01/29/genocide-and-ethnic-cleansing-of-the-rohingya-people-in-myanmar>.

43 Tolerance and Preserving Democratic Possibility

I had an interesting and thought-provoking conversation with a colleague recently in which I argued that people who deny the existence of climate change or are unwilling to acknowledge this nation's infrastructure crisis are misguided, as are individuals who are willing simply to criticize poor or otherwise marginalized citizens as the lone architects of and solely responsible for their own dilemmas. I suggested further that these individuals' stands ultimately are strongly undermining effective democratic governance and the social bonds that undergird it. My colleague seemed concerned that one could not make a negative judgment about the implications for policymaking or governance of a particular claimant's stance and still acknowledge their agency and listen tolerantly to their perspective.

I disagreed, as it seemed to me that not only was this assumption false, it profoundly misleads as it implied that any point of view must be accorded reasoned standing in the name of tolerance, no matter how manifestly false, or perhaps ethically or morally repugnant it may be. More deeply, on reflection I have been struck that this exchange points up a difficult problem for democracy and for those seeking to be good democrats who wish to honor the agency of those they encounter in a free and diverse society. How does one do that without necessarily accepting that all judgments, no matter how well or poorly informed or advised, should be accorded equal standing? That is, how does one do so without falling into a more or less unthinking and absolute relativism in philosophic terms? Not all points of view are healthy for sustaining democratic governance, and not all perspectives of whatever stripe are well reasoned or defensible in such terms. Again, how does one accord all individuals standing to believe what they wish and to share what they think without necessarily imagining that any view is as good as any other and should be so treated?

I am convinced that the claim that criticism necessarily implies unfair intolerance of disparate points of view rests on the individualist assertion that all viewpoints must be accorded status simply because they are embraced or voiced by citizens. I think a distinction must be made between the idea that all residents in a society dedicated to the preservation of individual freedom have very broad latitude to voice their views—however ill-

informed or judicious, hateful or empathetic—and the argument that all of those perspectives should be accorded equal weight or standing. Moreover, a considered judgment is just that. It suggests that for identifiable reasons (which others may contest), individuals may be wrong, sometimes dramatically, in their perspectives. This reasonableness standard also supposes that one must offer arguments for one's claims and not simply declarations of certainty (even in the face of contrary evidence) or allusions to the imagined villainy and nefariousness of those whom one opposes.

This stance demanding open and reasoned argumentation also provides latitude for acknowledging that human beings can and frequently do discriminate against others without reflection and with impunity and without grounds, too often absolutize their views despite the fact that the assertions they are making exist in explicit tension with other equally significant values, and so on. These positions historically have resulted in the loss of freedom for one or more groups in too many societies to recount here. And, notably, all of these actions were inimical to the principle of individual freedom on which their purveyors often implicitly relied for their articulation. Such claims ultimately must be criticized if liberty is to be maintained for all in a society. All of this suggests to me that there is space for serious examination of all points of view and that one may come to reasoned conclusions concerning their implications. To take this position is, I realize, also to say that one will try to be as fair, reflexive and transparent about one's criteria for judgment as is feasible. Nonetheless, it rejects explicitly that all viewpoints are equally acceptable, irrespective of their provenance or implications. Each of these concerns is worth brief additional consideration.

On the question of supposed intolerance because one is critical of a viewpoint, I find myself reflecting on the current situation in Myanmar where, paradoxically, greater personal freedom in recent years has unleashed a mobilization of hate-spewing Buddhist religious bigots who are jeopardizing that society's relative new-found liberty by viciously attacking and "othering" Muslims in that nation on no other ground than their existence and difference. This "popular" social movement now threatens the stability of any real freedom in that state. It is inimical to the human rights of those maligned and to any genuine prospect of democratization as a result. Any friend of freedom should not, indeed cannot, stand by and "tolerate" this situation on grounds of seeking to "understand" those making the claim. Freedom now stands at a crossroads in Myanmar, and if liberty is to have any

real chance, this malicious campaign must be identified for the tyranny it is and criticized roundly and publicly as such.

Similarly, to provide a policy example in this country, rather than a human/civil rights one, there are now no factual grounds to argue against the scientific consensus that climate change is occurring and demands immediate action, given its enormous implications for our own nation and all others. One may reasonably debate what steps to take and what strategy or strategies will prove most efficacious given the dangers and costs, but not whether something must be done. That is, it is not intolerant, given the preponderance of evidence, to call for needed action despite the vocal claims of some, on whatever grounds, that the phenomenon “really” does not exist. That stance is simply not factually tenable and is freighted with tremendous social costs. It should be critiqued and not “tolerated” on whatever grounds. It is likewise not intolerant to label Holocaust deniers delusional since there is absolutely no evidence to support their horrific (and typically anti-Semitic) claims. Shoah and climate change deniers are of course free to adopt their points of view in this nation, but that is not to say that those who rightly criticize their claims on factual grounds are intolerant for doing so. They are not.

These examples illustrate the point that one need not be blinkered to argue that a perspective is inimical to effective democratic governance or freedom (or both in some cases) or to justice or equality and so on, and to criticize it as such. I have deliberately picked examples that sharpen the contention, but the more important philosophical assertion here is that all views are not the same and individuals who deny others their civil or human rights, or who undermine the capacity of the people to rule themselves in ways that ensure freedom for all, should be subject to more intense scrutiny in democratic societies for those very reasons. Thus, to offer one more illustration, the imposition of onerous voter identification requirements, justified by their supporters as an effort to address factually non-existent vote fraud, should be sharply criticized for the cynical attempt the restrictions represent to prevent some groups from voting. Objecting to such action is neither partisan nor intolerant, but an attempt to preserve the civil rights of all voters in the name of their democratic freedoms against an effort to deny them their franchise to tilt electoral outcomes in a desired direction. In short, I see no reason to suppose that the critic in this example is “intolerant.” Indeed, the purveyors of this injustice should instead be so

regarded. Their misguided and misleading claims should and must be countered in the public dialogue.

Democracy will ever be a fragile form of governance, relying as it does on the higher natures of human beings for its preservation. We must not imagine that it cannot withstand robust conversation or that all of the claims made in freedom's name are factual or appropriate, or to be "tolerated." Instead arguments and assertions should be challenged vigorously when they threaten liberty or the individual human dignity that must underpin it.

(Originally published August 4, 2014)

44 Presence and Democratic Leadership

While a Ph.D. student, I worked at a leading Center for Public Affairs affiliated with the university I attended, as my mentor was a faculty member there. I conducted research for and with my lead professor on books related to the American presidency, but I participated in the broader life of the Center, too, and had opportunities to meet with its director for a variety of reasons. I actually knew that leader personally, as I had been a student in a graduate seminar on theories of international politics that he had led, a course I remember with fondness to this day. Before becoming the center's leader, this professor had been a vice president of the Rockefeller Foundation and had published an astonishing number of books. He was, in short, a deeply accomplished man.

One day I was called to the Director's office and was ushered in to see him. But I did not speak with him for most of an hour as he initiated and answered telephone calls in my presence. When I offered to leave several times, he gestured that I should remain. And so, I sat and slowly began to fume at what I then took to be supreme rudeness. At that time, I did not think (perhaps better put, I chose not to imagine) that this busy executive intended any slight, but it was nonetheless clear to me that I surely ranked near the bottom of his priorities at that moment.

Nonetheless, then as now, I soon concluded that no leader should knowingly treat anyone with whom he or she interacts with such apparent disrespect, even if unintended. As I sought to make sense of what I found so objectionable about this incident involving an individual I otherwise deeply admired, I concluded that he had robbed me of standing by treating me as insufficiently significant even to accord me the courtesy of allowing me to leave while he conducted his conversations. He had, without realizing it, refused to dignify me by declining to give me his undivided attention, his presence. That such treatment stung is perhaps obvious, since I can still recall the event.

And that is the point. Leaders must strive to interact with all with whom they work in ways that accord those individuals standing and dignity, so as to maximize the opportunity that their interaction will be fruitful for both parties and for the achievement of their shared interests. Modern-

day researchers in multiple fields have all underscored the central import of this apparently simple conclusion: presence matters profoundly. Analysts of communication have addressed this concern by arguing that leaders, especially, should practice active listening and center their complete attention on those with whom they interact. Indeed, these scholars have gone so far as to develop schema by which the efficacy of such interactions may be evaluated.

Theologians and mystics have likewise long suggested that such centeredness and attention to the other is the only known path to knowledge of God and therefore the way to treat others. One of my favorites of these authors of recent decades was the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, who once captured the multiple levels on which all human interaction operates when highlighting the importance of presence:

The deepest level of communication is not communication but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words and it is beyond speech and is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our essential unity. What we have to be is what we are.¹

Meanwhile, leadership theorists have also emphasized the significance of leaders developing capacities truly to listen, to be present and to be open to all people with whom they interact. Taken together and across multiple fields of inquiry, analysts have found that presence implies at least three key qualities that are equally central to effective leadership. When considered in light of the demands of self-governance, it appears that leaders' capacity to practice genuine presence is essential to democracy.

First, presence requires a disciplined willingness to be physically present for the person with whom one is interacting. Leaders are busy people and most confront many demands arising from multiple sources. The Center Director chose not to be present in our encounter and I left resentful as a result. But, to place the matter in today's context, apart from avoiding the rudeness of, for example, checking one's cell phone and answering texts, or answering email on a tablet during a conversation between individuals or among a group, physical presence demands more. It requires that leaders actually listen and provide their undivided attention to those with whom they are conversing. Such concentration dignifies the other with whom they

are interacting and contributes insights into what is at play at various levels of interaction and why, even as it offers respect to the perspective and concerns of the individual(s) with whom the leader is relating. It appears increasingly difficult today for many people to practice this discipline, as the lure of the screen and the “newest app” often prove siren-strong. Nevertheless, leaders must concentrate on ensuring their full availability or presence to others if they are to exercise their responsibilities ethically and effectively. When they do not so behave, they may create resentments and ill will and may even prompt those they fail to dignify to work actively to undermine them.

A second characteristic or quality involved in assuring presence is empathy, or an ability actively to imagine the situations and perspectives of those with whom one interacts. It seems difficult to overstate the significance of this capacity for leaders if they are to grasp the concerns, emotions, beliefs and values of those with whom they work. They must not only seek openly to engage others’ understandings, hope, fears and dreams if they are to work with those individuals to craft shared aspirations of common action, but also work to see how those with whom they interact have come to their views. The ability to consider the world from others’ vantage points appears essential to successful leadership, but it requires imagination and a willingness to place others’ interests above one’s own for at least long enough to dignify them in their expression.

For most leaders this capacity is learned and demands self-discipline, as humans appear naturally to believe our own views should be central in our interactions. To imagine otherwise and to strive to act intentionally on that possibility in all of one’s relationships implies self-reflection, sensitivity and awareness, especially when a leader perceives those with whom she is interacting as exhibiting or pressing ugly qualities, including boorishness, self-absorption, pridefulness or worse. Merton may have been correct that all of humanity is ultimately joined, but that insight does not come easily to most people, and acting on it appears to be yet more difficult. Leaders are challenged both to recognize this reality and to honor it in their interactions and relationships.

Finally, as the characteristics already discussed suggest, presence requires emotional and intellectual openness, and therefore vulnerability. For present purposes, I want to highlight openness as a capacity broader and antecedent to empathy, and one essential to democratic leadership. Understanding is required for presence and leadership, but that capacity implies a willingness

to be open to the possibilities represented by divergent experiences and viewpoints. One cannot learn if closed to an opportunity or idea before it presents itself. Leaders cannot be present without practicing openness. This seems particularly essential for democratic office holders who are charged with representing the needs of the citizenry they serve. To do so demands that they listen to the many voices represented in their constituencies and genuinely to consider even those with which they disagree.

Today's society provides its leaders many ways and means to engage with the populations they serve, but none can or should substitute for genuine presence. Leaders must be open, reflexive, empathetic and above all, genuinely respectful if they are to act with presence and to play their rightful roles in self-governance. This responsibility is essential and ethically demanding, and it cannot be gainsaid.

(Originally published September 29, 2014)

Notes

¹ Inchausti, Robert. 1998. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, p. 124.

45 Musings on Takers and Civic Identity

Paul Krugman sounded positively incredulous in his September 21, 2014, column in *The New York Times*.¹ House Speaker John Boehner, the titular leader of the nation's Republican Party, had offered comments a few days before at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C., once again placing responsibility for the situation confronted by the long-term unemployed on those individuals alone, attributing their predicament to their purported "laziness."² Boehner had done that despite the fallout and the political damage to the Romney presidential campaign in 2012, when the former governor had argued similarly that 47 percent of the U.S. citizens were "takers." For his part, in his remarks at AEI in response to a question, Boehner lamented that,

this idea that has been born, maybe out of the economy over the last couple years, that you know, I really don't have to work. I don't really want to do this. I think I'd rather just sit around. This is a very sick idea for our country.³

And as Krugman contended, Boehner also made this argument concerning the 3 million Americans constituting the long-term unemployed, after the GOP had successfully ended national public support for those individuals. Many states have followed suit. Indeed, the reality was that as Boehner spoke, only 26 percent of the jobless were receiving any kind of unemployment benefit. This low level of public aid undercuts the Speaker's contention that millions are lounging lazily on their proverbial couches watching reality television shows and eating bon bons on the citizens' dime. The assertion was simply not factually true.

In his attempt to grapple with why this claim nonetheless continues to have such traction for conservatives despite its fictive character, Krugman speculated that it might be an effort at race baiting, since many conservatives believe (again falsely) that dark-skinned individuals make up the majority of the unemployed.⁴ The Nobel Prize-winning economist also wondered if Boehner might simply be preaching to the choir in the Republican Party base, which routinely gets its information from a closed

and self-reinforcing limited set of sources, including Fox Cable, the AEI and other conservative ideologically oriented think tanks.⁵ These, for their own purposes, do nothing to correct the sorts of claims the House leader offered as they appeal to a share of the population and mobilize their support—both money and votes.

While I agree that this sort of group think is likely afoot and that GOP strategists, going back at least to Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy," have shown themselves disposed to play the "race card" when they calculated it would yield votes, I believe that all of these assertions also more deeply represent a redefinition of civic identity in favor of a profoundly individualistic and thoroughly marketized conception. That is, they represent, consciously or not, an attack on the idea of a political civic identity itself. While purportedly celebrating hard work and self-discipline, Boehner was actually arguing for an extraordinary conception of citizenship that is really not recognizable as citizenship at all. Instead, it is an idea of the democratic citizen that celebrates supposed market "victors" (while remaining silent on how they may have acquired their comfortable status) and decrying all attempts to imagine that civic identity ought, under virtually any conceivable circumstances, play a role in ameliorating individual suffering or constructing and maintaining a social commons.

This trope is hardly new and its primary consequence, when argued in principle as Boehner set out to do, is to undermine the legitimacy of any public claim for individual citizens' support, directly or indirectly. The results of that orientation to civic identity are already becoming evident in the nation's crumbling infrastructure and public higher education crises, among other challenges that might be highlighted.

As it happens, Dante Alighieri treated this concern in *The Divine Comedy*. The great poet and thinker offered a conversation on this topic among a poet, a philosopher and a politician in the *Paradiso* section of his masterwork. Dante described the public corruption of his time to his imagined interlocutors, and the prince with whom he was conversing asked, "Would it be worse for man if he were not a citizen on earth, but left to his own sufficiency?" The poet replied, "Yes, ... and I do not need to ask the reason."⁶ The unstated premise in this colloquy was that human beings are political animals and cannot live in radically individuated states, nor can they imagine life without some sort of society as a result, whatever its frailties and challenges. That is, these allegorical figures shared the view that human beings could not live as so many autonomous atoms and survive. But Dante

did not leave the reason for this agreement among his conversationalists unstated. Instead, he had the philosopher inquire where society would be without a city (a metaphor for a commons of shared responsibility, anchored by a citizenry willing and able to support it). Dante's thinker contended that not only would life without the city not produce any sort of civic identity, it would result in the breakdown of the entire possibility represented by the idea of society itself—appeals to the commons complete and enhance individual possibility in ways that entreaties linked to purely private goods cannot.⁷

Dante's profound insight into humanity and society has been ignored in the GOP's ideological war of the moment. Those belittling unemployed citizens (or other groups who may be "othered" to gain political support) undermine the potential for a civic identity underpinned by shared responsibility and common bonds in favor of a vision of unfettered market-driven individualism. These zealots are unwilling to temper their claims for fear they will lose their mobilizing force or open themselves to attack from others offering purer forms of the contentions they advance. At bottom, it surely does not matter whether their assertions are aimed at mobilizing around existing ignorance and prejudice, seeking to encourage the formation of unawareness and discrimination in segments of the population that may then be exploited for political gain, or arising from the fact that many so engaged live and work in a media environment dominated by narrowcast visions. A broadcast and print megaphone daily trumpeting outrage over the nation's "takers" certainly reinforces conservatives' utopian belief that one can and should sustain a free society on the basis of an atomistic individualism governed principally not by a shared sense of civic identity and purpose, but instead by obeisance to a supposed all-knowing marketplace.

This sort of unspoken and often poorly articulated contention undermines the possibility of any civic identity beyond the merely idolatrous, and it pretends that human beings can live freely in societies with no glue to join citizens to what Dante supposed were their innately common political identities. It imagines that a free society can exist when its citizens need acknowledge no bond or responsibility to one another. It bespeaks not a robust vision of social possibility, but one of disaffection and smug satisfaction that will do nothing to ensure freedom, but instead tear persistently at the bonds necessary to legitimate and sustain it. In short, the current conservative collective belief that the commons can be redefined

away drains with it the possibility of politics and any shared understanding of civic identity. As such it is not merely angry and divisive, but also deeply corrodes the very possibility of society as something other than an assemblage of what the philosopher Thomas Hobbes' once aptly dubbed a "War of all against all." As Dante knew, that condition will not, indeed cannot, sustain society, let alone a self-governing polity.

(Originally published October 6, 2014)

Notes

¹ Krugman, Paul. 2014. "Those Lazy Jobless," *The New York Times*, September 21. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/opinion/paul-krugman-those-lazy-jobless.html>.

² Krugman, "Those Lazy Jobless."

³ Reuters Newswire. 2014. "John Boehner is Sick of Unemployed People that would 'Rather Just Sit Around,'" *The Huffington Post*, September 18. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/18/john-boehner-unemployed_n_5846084.html.

⁴ Krugman, "Those Lazy Jobless."

⁵ Krugman, "Those Lazy Jobless."

⁶ Alighieri, Dante. 1320. *The Divine Comedy*. Translated by H. F. Cary. Project Gutenberg, 2005. Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/8800/8800-h/8800-h.htm>, Paradiso: Canto VIII, Line 120.

⁷ Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*.

46 On Death and Democratic Imagination

Doris Grumbach was already a well-known American fiction writer, biographer and literary critic when she chose at 71 to write a memoir. That work, *Coming into the End Zone*, was both warmly received and a plangent evocation of the aging process.¹ She has since published other celebrated books pondering what it means to grow old, and continues in her 96th year to offer deeply evocative essays that confront mortality. The most recent such piece I have read appeared in *The American Scholar* in spring 2014, “A Whole Day Nearer Now but All Life’s Passion Not Quite Spent.”² In that article, Grumbach reflected on the daily reality of living with the vicissitudes of old age including, in her case, as a lifelong bibliophile, coping with the loss of much of her sight. Nonetheless, as the title of her essay implied, Grumbach still finds much for which to live, despite her deep and unflinching awareness of what it means to experience your own body failing you ever more each day. As she considered the vagaries this reality can create, the author thought of poet Philip Larkin’s musings on death, and in particular his insight that

This is the first thing

I have understood:

Time is the echo of an axe

Within a wood.³

The often dark Larkin was perhaps never more frankly or harshly tragic than in this short poem in which he portrayed time as an unrelenting and callous force that would annihilate all possibility, just as the axe finally ensures the same for the tree into which it bites.

While highlighting Larkin’s insight and arguing that one may not naively proceed as if death was not the end point for all human beings, Grumbach also contended that one may not look only to death and closure and meanwhile live a fulfilled life. Accordingly, she outlined her ongoing passions, including living increasingly amidst the furnishings of experience that her long life has provided. Grumbach illustrated her contention concerning the

critical importance of awareness, and of engaging with experience as it unfolds in all of its complexity, as follows:

Moles were once believed to be blind. Their eyes were hidden under a layer of skin. 'Traces of these covered organs can be found if that skin is cut,' recent research reports. But when moles are close to death, they begin to open their eyes. I share the mole's lack of sight and, like them, I have spent too much of my life without seeing much that is around me.⁴

I want to focus here on Grumbach's point concerning the broader implications of missing much in life for lack of attention, both directly and as a result of assumptions that close off much possible experience, of whatever character.

The author's statement might be interpreted in multiple ways, all of which I believe suggest the powerful significance of empathy linked to a desire and capacity to subject lived experience to reflection, and an ongoing willingness to revisit one's sense-making assumptions. As it turns out, all of these attributes also are important to self-governance, and all are now in danger in a culture and a polity that seem increasingly to be losing their willingness to imagine, let alone value, all but individual and material possibility that can be measured in purely instrumental terms.

I suggested last week that it is difficult to understand House of Representatives Speaker John Boehner's recent attack on the long-term unemployed unless one recalls the epistemic assumptions and frame that underpin his view.⁵ That perspective is both profoundly individualistic and materialistic in what it professes to value. In this view, any individuals who are not succeeding in the economy are alone responsible for their situation and in consequence must simply be lazy. Likewise, the only lens that matters as one evaluates such concerns is whether those people are perceived as sufficiently worthy to gain employment. The lone metric of the value of their lives, and of their characters, inheres in their employment status and relative success in such terms. As I argued last week, this point of view assumes that the market and its goods are appropriate arbiters of what constitutes the good in society, and that in no event should individuals assume that solidarity with other citizens, either in the United States or beyond, is necessary or appropriate as one pursues one's own quest for material well-being. There is little room in this vision for empathy, let alone

suggesting that others' needs, knowledge, experience and understanding might be as vital or even more important than one's own. In short, in principle, this view allows one to banish from one's life any claims that others may make of one. The corollary of this proposition is a rationale for truncating one's horizon to the individual and material. What matters is what one may do and achieve for oneself conceived as a solitary animal, and that supersedes all else, including, especially, any acknowledgment of the standing, needs and situations of others in society.

Grumbach's essay warned of the perils of a headlong rush through life on whatever basis: One is likely to miss much of what is most significant as one presses ahead to attain whatever aims are animating one's pursuit. Using Grumbach's terms, Boehner's singular vision was to justify a mole-like existence for Americans, empty of both genuine awareness and empathy for others, and implicitly devoid of the need for interaction itself, except as an instrument to fulfill one's desires. Grumbach lamented how much she had missed for failing to notice it. We now have many public leaders of all stripes who assert that just such is a good thing for Americans individually and for the nation as a whole.

These assumptions, should they ultimately prevail and become dominant ways that citizens accept for making sense of reality, will despoil our democracy and society in a manner very like that against which Grumbach poetically warned; a failure to pay attention would certainly rob lives of a major share of their possible meaning. Societies, no less than individuals, can learn not to value others, not to acknowledge the earth on which their survival depends and not to imagine that human beings cannot exist alone. These arguments will lead, if finally wholly triumphant, to a society of mole-like citizens, aware they once had sight and freedom, but now unable to see with acuity what their assumptions had wrought until their death, literally and figuratively, awaits.

(Originally published October 13, 2014)

Notes

¹ Grumbach, Doris. 1991. *Coming into the End Zone*. New York NY: W.W. Norton & Co.

² Grumbach, Doris. 2014. "A Whole Day Nearer Now: But All Life's Passion not Quite Spent." *The American Scholar* (Spring), pp.74-80.

³ Larkin, Philip. 2004. "This is the First Thing" in *Collected Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p.295.

⁴ Grumbach, Doris. "A Whole Day Nearer Now," p.80.

⁵ Reuters Newswire. 2014. "John Boehner is Sick of Unemployed People that would 'Rather Just Sit Around,'" *The Huffington Post*, September 18. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/18/john-boehner-unemployed_n_5846084.html.

47 On Moral Courage, Social Norms and Self-Governance

Kailash Satyarthi leads an organization called Bachpan Bachao Andolan, or Save the Children Mission, in India. On October 10 he learned he would share this year's Nobel Peace Prize with the much better known Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan, an advocate of children and girls' education. UNICEF, the United Nations children's agency, has suggested that about 28 million children, ages 6-14, are presently working in India. Many are doing so against their will and/or in terrible inhuman conditions. To date, Satyarthi's organization has saved some 70,000 from such situations in his native nation.

One might expect that this circumstance—children working against their will and in horrific conditions—would occasion moral outrage and sustained efforts at local, national and international scales to address what seems on its face an abomination that any person of good will would wish to eliminate. But Satyarthi and Bachpan Bachao Andolan stand out precisely because there is so little political will to change this situation in India, or in many other nations. Here is how *The New York Times* described Satyarthi's organization's challenge and the underpinning of the lack of political enthusiasm it daily confronts:

As India undergoes swift economic expansion, a growing middle class has created a surging demand for domestic workers, jobs often filled by children. There is virtually no enforcement of labor laws, and newspapers regularly carry accounts of children sold into service and confined in horrific conditions, paid nothing and barely fed. They are sought-after employees, and in a population struggling with dire poverty, there is little will to stamp out the practice.¹

This analysis suggests the utility of distinguishing between child labor as a business practice and the malicious greed and discrimination that often attend that condition, and such toil as a consequence of need. These two motivations apparently have become knotted in India and elsewhere, and when they do become entwined, it is the youngsters who suffer the horrific life results of penury and worse. This said, the *Times* article implied that the practice of child labor is primarily economic in its origins. While many

families living at a subsistence level surely prevent their youngsters from attending school, most do so because they perceive it necessary for survival. But that incentive hardly fully explains these practices, especially those that result in active mistreatment and enslavement of children. Cultural norms also often support exploitation of children. The Gandhi-like Satyarthi's original interest in what became the passion that has found him beaten and bloodied by those he investigated, began as a child himself:

Asked to explain the origin of his life's work, Mr. Satyarthi sometimes tells a story from his childhood, when he proudly entered a schoolyard for the first time and noticed a boy his own age, the son of a cobbler, gazing at him from outside the gate. He screwed up his courage and approached the cobbler, asking why his son did not go to school. "He replied, 'Look, sir, we are the people who are born to work,'" he said. 'I was so disturbed. Why do we people have so many dreams, and they have none? This has gone so deep to my heart, and that is when I started working with poor children. It was a nonissue in my country.'²

This account of Satyarthi's awakening to the moral imperative that has consumed his life, suggests that while the twin forces of need and greed may indeed underpin child labor and slavery, that motivation often exists alongside or is buttressed by a cultural disposition or norms that often convince the children's families that their youngsters' role in life is simply to labor— in sufferance, as their plight as minions or instruments, may demand. This worldview reminds one of the serfs of the Middle Ages who were convinced that their lot was a reflection of an ordained social cosmology and fate. Likewise, many in India's middle class and among its industrialists appear to believe that these children are so contemptible and undeserving—as a result of their accident of birth and poverty—that they deserve their status as virtual or actual slaves. That is, the worldview and greed of these “employers” combine to lead them to treat other human beings as detritus and to rob them of all dignity. And, as Bachpan Bachao Andolan's experience suggests, this reality is compounded by the fact that governments (in India and elsewhere), reflecting the perspective and norms of their constituents, exhibit little or no interest in changing the situation. This demoralizing scenario occasions the urgent need for someone to

remind populations of the moral outrage their habits of mind are perpetrating and to articulate the need for change.

A quick read of any of many Charles Dickens' novels or stories and a scan of our own nation's history and current political environment, with its long-lived willingness to ascribe diminished standing to groups based on our cultural dispositions and on petty hatreds and fears, suggest that this sort of behavior is neither new nor unique to India. Human beings seem ever to have been disposed to view some in their midst as "less than" and to treat them with callous contempt and active hate as a result. This has been true for hundreds of years in the United States regarding how mentally ill and disabled individuals have been treated in practice (if not now in law). An often brutal discrimination continues against both groups in America today. Cultural norms in the United States have also supported slavery and segregation in the past and underpin today's continuing willingness among many to discriminate against African Americans and immigrants.

At its core, this readiness to join economic calculation and cultural propensity to rationalize morally contemptible treatment of others poses a fundamental challenge to self-governance. Apart from the manifest and profound injustice at play in situations of bondage and maltreatment of children in India and elsewhere today, free societies simply cannot survive over the long pull if some individuals within them are denied their standing or rights as human beings. This is true of adults and children alike and appears to be particularly essential for the innocent and helpless among us, as it is treatment of these groups that reveals the relative sturdiness of our collective devotion to the beliefs in rights and freedom we otherwise profess. Tellingly, however, as the ongoing situation with child labor in India suggests, it is just these vulnerable groups that often occasion the most depraved behavior from their fellow human beings. I leave to others the search for explanations for how so many can rationalize their cruelty and callous orientation to those who can do so little to defend themselves. What must and can be emphasized here is how vital the role of societal leaders, such as Satayarthi, is to raise broader public awareness and salience of the injustice such views and actions represent.

It often suits individuals to demean and cast opprobrium on innocent or suffering people as innately meriting their lot because somehow "beneath" others. Such a stance rationalizes their mistreatment. Sanctioning such behavior, however, will always result in the enervation of freedom in the societies that countenance it for any period. Paradoxically, however, many

leaders in democratic nations will find it in their electoral interest both to echo those beliefs and often to curry them, since such behavior implies political support. Changing such dispositions, rather than parroting or exploiting them, always requires leaders with the moral courage to confront and decry such attitudes, and to lead others to reflect on their beliefs in light of the values they claim to embrace.

Human greed, prejudice and avarice have ever led to corrupt behavior, and one may expect that will not change. What can shift is democratic governments' complicity with the systematic oppression of such groups. Such social change demands the voice of leaders such as Kailash Satyarthi, who often must be willing to risk their own lives to bring such injustice to the fore. The Nobel Committee surely made an excellent choice and highlighted a critical need in its selection of Satyarthi for its Peace Prize this year. His is work of the highest moral and democratic importance.

(Originally published October 19, 2014)

Notes

¹ Barry, Ellen. 2014. "Kailash Satyarthi's Nobel Peace Prize Caps Decades of Fighting Child Slavery in India," *The New York Times*, October 10. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/11/world/asia/kailash-satyarthis-nobel-peace-prize-caps-decades-of-fighting-child-slavery-in-india.html?action=click&contentCollection=Asia%20Pacific&module=RelatedCoverage@ion=Marginalia&pgtype=article>.

² Barry, "Kailash Satyarthi's Nobel Peace Prize."

48 Reflections on Democratic Leadership and Popular Exploitation

The Institute I direct helped to host a newly retired distinguished United Nations official this past week. He had just completed 27 years of service in locations throughout the world, most recently in a leadership role in peacekeeping in Lebanon. During his visit to a graduate seminar I lead concerning leadership and governance, he shared the story of an encounter with a young man while on a packed bus traveling through a seedy part of his hometown. He was sufficiently concerned about conditions that he removed his wallet from the back pocket of his slacks and placed it in the breast pocket of his suit jacket. When the young man departed the bus, our guest felt for his billfold in his back pocket and, not finding it there, was certain that the individual had taken it. Our visitor jumped from the bus and shortly had the young man pinned against it (with an alarmed audience aboard the vehicle witnessing his actions) and screamed at him to return the wallet. Our guest soon discovered, however, that his billfold was still in his own pocket. This episode, he reported, was built on a false certainty borne of fear and fury, and it ended in acute embarrassment and chagrin.

Our visitor shared this story to illustrate a broader point concerning leadership, especially democratic leadership. Such officials must be able to discipline their behavior and be careful about reaching conclusions without significant evidence suggesting their accuracy. First reactions cannot be prevented, so leaders must learn actively to hold those perceptions in abeyance until such time as evidence suggests that their observations and judgment are indeed compelling. This aptitude or capacity requires self-reflection and self-awareness in addition to self-discipline to prevent the equivalent of the sort of scenario our guest described.

A broader conclusion one may draw from this example is that fear is a profoundly powerful force, and that democratic leaders bear a special responsibility to distinguish between when strong responses in the name of fear are appropriate, and when these are likely only to worsen situations and conditions. All of this is pertinent as America's political leaders debate how best to address the advent of the Ebola virus epidemic in three nations

in West Africa. However apt the argument that democratic officials bear a singular responsibility not to exacerbate the fears of the populace they serve in situations such as this outbreak, it is nonetheless tempting for too many such individuals to exploit the power of fear for their own electoral purposes or personal efforts to gain power. The result in such situations—when leaders succeed in whipping a broad share of the general population into hysteric frenzy concerning a postulated menace—is always injustice and worse.

Consider for example, the panic that swept the United States near the advent of World War II that Japanese-Americans would prove disloyal to the nation; that fear resulted in the round-up and internment of tens of thousands of innocent citizens in a perpetration of mass injustice. Consider, too, the Red Scare of the 1950s, led by the monomaniacal Senator Joseph McCarthy (WI), that resulted in unjust treatment of thousands and the ruin of many professional careers. Ponder, too, the more recent populist claims of many U.S. leaders concerning the nonexistent “menace” of immigration from South America, resulting in the construction of a highly securitized wall along 700 miles of the nation’s boundary with Mexico, and a recent refusal to handle with humanity the situation of thousands of children at the border. Finally, recall how too many Americans, because of fear unleashed by the September 2001 terrorist attacks, actively discriminated against this nation’s Muslims on the basis of nothing more than their faith.

One might expand this list of past examples of how our country’s citizens and elected officials have responded to fearful events with shameful actions. I want to highlight a share of our political leaders’ current rhetoric concerning the Ebola virus that I believe illustrates how important it continues to be for our officials to discipline their personal ambitions for the public good when they might otherwise play on popular fears. It is likewise essential for citizens to be able to discern when would-be leaders are manipulating their emotions for personal aggrandizement or to gain office or power. Here, for example, is what CBS News reported concerning what Senator Rand Paul (R-Kentucky), an ophthalmologist, and a likely GOP candidate for the presidency in 2016, had to say recently concerning the West African Ebola virus epidemic:

With millions of Americans already worried about the Ebola virus, Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky, fanned the flames by suggesting that the risk of infection is greater than global medical authorities say—and that the Obama administration is misleading the public about it. In

footage from CNN of his speech at Plymouth State University in New Hampshire, the prospective GOP presidential candidate called Ebola ‘incredibly contagious,’ and told the crowd that the virus can be spread to another person standing three feet away. He also said he believes the White House is withholding this information. ‘If someone has Ebola at a cocktail party they’re contagious and you can catch it from them,’ said Paul. ‘[The administration] should be honest about that.’ Public health officials say our decades of experience dealing with Ebola outbreaks in Africa has proven that’s not the case. ‘Should you be worried you might have gotten it by sitting next to someone?’ Dr. Tom Frieden, director of the CDC, said Wednesday. ‘The answer to that is no.’ Sen. Paul also claimed that Ebola is easier to contract than AIDS. ‘You’re not going to get AIDS at a cocktail party. No one’s going to cough on you and you’re going to get AIDS,’ he said.¹

In short, Paul chose falsely to “fan the flames” of citizens’ concerns, in the face of decades of contrary public health evidence, to gain media salience and positioning in campaign politics. It is difficult not to label this for what it is: profoundly irresponsible behavior that might further fuel misplaced public hysteria. Meanwhile, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal (R) has used the virus situation as fodder for his anti-immigration campaign and has called for closing the American border to people from West Africa, whether known to be infected or not.

Sadly, this list of recent lamentable rhetoric by American public officials could be extended. What it suggests is the dearth of any self-imposed limitations among potential presidential candidates concerning what they might say to exploit the electorate’s fears (already overblown, in this case) for personal gain. Should their actions and statements result in widespread public hysteria concerning the Ebola situation, history suggests that injustice will occur. This situation underscores how important it is for reporters and analysts to characterize this behavior as the jingoism it is, and for citizens to take steps to inform themselves more fully to avoid manipulation. The present Ebola scenario illustrates one of the most enduring and difficult challenges of democratic governance: preserving the rights of all citizens in fear-filled situations, while avoiding the imposition of majority tyranny. This public health challenge may be regarded as a test of our nation’s capacity for self-governance, and one that too many of our leaders and citizens are surely failing thus far.

(Originally published October 26, 2014)

Notes

¹ CBS News, 2014. "Sen. Rand Paul says dangers of Ebola are downplayed," October 16. Available at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/sen-rand-paul-says-dangers-of-ebola-are-downplayed/>.

49 Acknowledging the Lessons of History

Many writers I much admire have offered accounts of their reading habits, and most that I have seen have suggested they read more than one book at a time. My own habit is similar, as I often find myself reading three or four books at a time. I also keep a “pending” pile of texts I look forward to reading. Typically, I have browsed most of these titles, dipping into their arguments and familiarizing myself with their warp and woof to gain a better idea of which volume I shall address next. One new and disturbing book on my “to read” list is by Yale University historian John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune of 1871*.¹ Merriman offers a detailed and often searing account of the politics and street-level unfolding of the May 1871 attack by 130,000 well-equipped members of the French Army on a ragtag group of citizens in Paris. When the incursion was over a week later, the army had killed approximately 10,000 people and arrested 36,000, of whom roughly 10,000 were executed (without trial), deported or imprisoned.

The Commune movement, as it was called, was led by a group of self-employed artists and minor professionals and was not radical in character. Instead, its members felt betrayed by the nation’s government, which had sued for a harsh peace with Germany following France’s ill-advised war with that country the prior year. But the conservative government in power saw this relatively small group seeking increased autonomy and the redress of economic grievances as a revolution, and acted with unfathomable savagery against its own people in consequence. The national force that attacked the Commune outnumbered its “foe,” so the outcome of the “battle” was never in doubt. Nonetheless, the French forces systematically killed armed and unarmed individuals alike and shot prisoners with impunity. All of this resulted from a government-created campaign of fear and anger that led to a shocking view of the Commune townspeople and dehumanized them. The regime and ruling party then acted on the basis of their own invented trope concerning those they attacked.

This moral outrage was markedly sad on its face, but it is still more deeply ironic and unsettling, as Merriman makes clear, when one understands that its perpetrators soon accepted the Commune’s aims as their own policy and direction. In short, the killings were purposeless and predicated on a

fear built of a constructed and imagined foe and a persistent drum beat of supposed nefariousness that never existed. The Commune's members and aims bore little resemblance to the lurid portrait that "justified" the regime's actions.

While our nation's politics has certainly not descended to systematic slaughter of its own people, this extreme episode of the potential consequences of socially constructed fear and anger sounds too familiar not to serve as a warning to our own citizens and leaders concerning how easy it can be to slip into dehumanizing and demonizing one's foes, even when these are a portion of your own citizenry. In fact, in ways large and small, many of our country's leaders are engaged in forms of such behaviors. For example, we have recently witnessed a Republican congressional staff member criticize President Barack Obama's children on social media for what she called their lack of decorum at a White House ceremony, while also demeaning the President and his spouse as beneath contempt as role models and national leaders. We have also seen leaders of that same party oppose virtually everything Obama has proposed during his tenure, not because they actually have always disagreed with those steps, but because they believed (rightly, as it happened) that citizens would blame the President and his party politically for the resulting perceived inaction. Both of these examples reveal an unsettling pattern and habit of mind.

Unfortunately, there are many other examples of this Republican propensity. For instance, the GOP has now launched multiple "investigations" into the tragic events in Benghazi with no evidence to support anything reprehensible, but the claims of outrage nonetheless continue as a way to characterize the administration as feckless while arousing a partisan base to oppose former Secretary Hillary Clinton, should she run for the Presidency in 2016. Fear, hatred and rage, it seems, even when they are without any relationship to reality and are cynically propounded, are strong motivators.

If this stance has characterized Republican efforts during the current presidency, it was surely at play, too, in the nation's reactions in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks in 2001. Thereafter,

- Then U.S. President (George W. Bush (R)), announced that these events could be seen only dichotomously, and nations and peoples around the world could only either be for us or against us;
- The United States shortly launched two major and very costly wars that

continue as I write, by invading and occupying Afghanistan and Iraq to address the fear of continued terrorism;

- The President pressed for and received permission to curtail American civil liberties significantly and to permit much greater surveillance of that population by its government on the grounds that such was necessary to prevent terrorist attacks, i.e., to mitigate fear;
- Tens of thousands of American citizens were persecuted by their fellow residents on the basis of their perceived national origins or religious faith, out of fear of their perceived difference;
- The United States government developed a rendition program to handle alleged “terrorists,” and also engaged in the systematic torture of many of those prisoners, while seeking to keep both efforts secret. All of this was “justified” as necessary to prevent future terrorist attacks.

That is, in our own nation and time, the Republican Party leaders’ reactions to world events and the GOP’s hypercritical treatment of Obama have helped to foster an atmosphere not unlike that of France in 1871. These actions have included an unwillingness to call out conspiracy theorists in the GOP’s ranks and people who question Obama’s citizenship, along with a companion willingness to “other” immigrants and minorities in order to galvanize specific groups to the polls. Millions in the U.S. are fearful as a result of long-term economic changes spawned by globalization and have been told repeatedly and falsely by the Republican Party, which has systematically played on those fears, that certain population groups and their own government’s incompetence are to blame for their situations. Now, as in post Franco-Prussian War France, these assertions and this narrative have been deliberately constructed and bear little relationship to a far more complex reality. Nonetheless and more to the point, the citizens at whom these efforts are aimed often do find them credible and they serve to reinforce the fears on which they rely.

A combination of public hysteria and scapegoating based on a constructed narrative led to mass murder in France in 1871. In the United States a similar combination of fear, loathing and phantasm has constructed an atmosphere that has thus far led to secret rendition and torture, mass discrimination, poorly considered and conceived wars and a Party’s systematic effort to prevent effective governance. The U.S. has already ignored several lessons of the Commune tragedy, and now a share of this nation’s governing officials

and leaders, many of whom were architects or agents of its past misguided efforts, have an opportunity to avoid additional damage to the polity they serve. The allure of power and the strength of scapegoating strategies targeted to a fearful public here in the United States are by now obvious. What is less clear is whether the path the Republican Party has charted in the past will continue under a new condition of GOP congressional control. It certainly may. Alternatively, there is some hope that the Party's leaders will now assume responsibility for governance, rather than continue to create imaginary narratives that allow it to scorn and "other" governance, officials and citizens in ways that energize fear and loathing and undermine regime legitimacy but accomplish little else. History, in the guise of the Commune tragedy, teaches that the costs can be enormous when those who construct false narratives to mobilize come themselves to believe and act on them.

(Originally published December 15, 2014)

Notes

¹ Merriman, John. 2014. *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune of 1871*. New York: Basic Books.

50 On Epistemology and Democratic Politics

If you were to ask most Americans what epistemology is and how it is important to United States politics and to our common capacity to secure freedom and full civil rights for all of this nation's citizens, I suspect you would receive many blank looks and not a few headshakes. Nevertheless, I have slowly concluded that few subjects are more important to our country's democratic vitality than how we collectively come to "know" what we believe. Epistemology comes from a Greek compound word meaning the study of knowledge, and it has constituted a branch of philosophy for more than 2,000 years. Those examining these concerns have debated whether there is a reality independent of what individuals construct, how human beings acquire knowledge and what constitutes a fact or belief, among many other significant topics.

I was reminded of the signal character of this subject recently when a speaker for a presentation I attended alluded to the ancient parable of the blind men and the elephant. While there is some controversy concerning its origins, the story, familiar to most, finds a group of blind men exploring the head, tail, trunk, ears and tusk of an elephant. Each individual concludes that the animal is something other than what it is, based on the feature he had explored. But this is not the moral of the account, which follows instead from how the men treated their various conclusions. The individuals refused to listen to the views of others and, as the Buddhist version goes, "They began to quarrel, shouting, 'Yes it is!' 'No, it is not!' 'An elephant is not that!' 'Yes, it's like that!' and so on, till they came to blows over the matter."¹ The ultimate lesson of this narrative is presented as follows in the Indian version: "O how they cling and wrangle, some who claim For preacher and monk the honored name! For, quarreling, each to his view they cling. Such folk see only one side of a thing."²

For present purposes, I want to highlight that these individuals fell into a fight in a dispute concerning the nature of reality and of knowledge regarding, in this case, what the animal before them was. None was willing to compromise and the result was not just disagreement, but violence. The parallel to our nation's politics today is apparent: Our current elected leaders on Capitol Hill are deeply polarized and increasingly unwilling to do anything

but attack those who advance different views. While these officials do not typically come to blows as the blind men in the parable did, most are more than expert at delivering verbal thrusts designed to undermine the standing and legitimacy of those they target.

While this is surely so, I want here to examine briefly, in addition, two of our society's assumptions about knowledge and three major cultural trends that allow this phenomenon to occur in the first instance. The beliefs about knowledge to which I refer inhere in modern philosophic thinking. The first cultural trend concerns how adroitly our leaders and others have come to address our collective foibles and passions as human beings. A second social development relates to how our profound individualism, together with our common devotion to the market, has yielded a media that allows Americans to receive information tailored to their conceptions of reality that serve to reinforce their biases and prejudices. A third cultural shift finds large numbers of voters knowing little about their own governments and politics, with few traditional cues to inform them (resulting from the decline of political party identification). Together these factors have created a citizenry that believes itself entitled to interpret reality and to discern knowledge, but finds itself increasingly ill-equipped and perhaps unwilling to do so in ways that ensure the rights and interests of all of its members.

The first assumption concerning knowledge helping to shape our politics arose with the modern turn in philosophic inquiry. Since that watershed human beings have not looked to bring their behavior or understanding into accord or conformity with a cosmology or reality they understand to be beyond themselves, but instead have sought to construct their own view or knowledge of the world. Indeed, modernism situated capacity for such efforts in individuals who were expected to make such choices for themselves. Instead of deferring to a divinely chosen monarch or to a church, for example, to ordain what is understood as an ordered life in accord with the universe, individuals were now free to make such decisions and to take responsibility themselves for such ordering as might occur. The Oxford medievalist scholar C.S. Lewis remarked on this shift memorably in the *Abolition of Man*, "For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline and virtue. For ... applied science ... the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men."³

In addition to this sea change, modern philosophy brought with it another assumption: that human knowledge of something, to be a fact, had to rest

on certainty and to be the product of propositions, statements and proofs. Knowingly or not, and however theoretically freeing psychologically, since very little about life is probatively certain, this assumption allows individuals to dismiss alternate views and alternative knowledge with relative impunity and to argue for their own (or none) instead—setting up a neat scenario not only for conflict, but also for delegitimizing perspectives and those people who hold them with which one disagrees with little thought and few or no repercussions.

To these prevailing assumptions about knowledge American society has added a cultural trend toward “perception management,” the efforts by many organized interests, political leaders and would-be leaders to manage information so as to persuade citizens to view reality and understand knowledge as these actors wish them to perceive it. These initiatives include appeals particularly to emotions and prejudices, especially fears, but their purveyors are hardly strangers to manipulating information, when it suits their interests and aims to do so. As it happens, our disposition as voters to decide what is real ourselves, joined with our desire to demand certainty and our relative lack of understanding and information about our governments and regime, set Americans up as too often uninformed and readily manipulable, although ironically nominally independent, arbiters when these claimants come courting.

Unfortunately, to these phenomena one must add still one more development: a by and large profit-driven media that is increasingly splintered to provide audiences what they wish to see or hear concerning virtually every dimension of their lives. If people wish to be told that their government is led by a closeted Muslim who is not an American citizen, they can find interests and media outlets that will tell them that just such is so. If they wish to believe that climate change is a “liberal” hoax perpetrated by a conspiracy among hundreds of scientists from all over the world, they can daily tune to television and radio shows or read internet blogs and “news” that will happily inform them that just such an outrage is befalling them. Meanwhile, individuals and corporations desiring to limit government regulation of their activities, whether those are related to mining or pipelines or chemical manufacture, annually spend millions in media-centered electoral and advocacy campaigns to persuade citizens that any regulation of these firms’ ability to despoil the earth and air is the product of overreaching “job killing” public officials, with an interest not in health, safety and the preservation of the environment, but in taking their employment from them.

These corporations' aim in these efforts is to increase their profits and avoid responsibility for the broader costs their activities may impose.

These issues and trends suggest the potent cocktail our collective and individuated epistemic understanding has created, united with our devotion to the market and with the reality of a splintered media seeking our fiscal support by telling us what we wish to hear. In addition to these factors, we now have political leaders and interests actively seeking to construct our collective understanding of reality to accord with one that provides them power or serves their interests. Americans have assumed responsibility to serve as arbiters of the health of their Republic's institutions and ultimately, their rights and freedom as democratic citizens. Nevertheless, they have elected increasingly to address this challenge in ways that allow them, based on their understanding of the locus and character of knowledge, to repudiate views different than their own, and in a landscape that does nothing to discourage uninformed and imprudent actions on their part. Indeed, their individualism, fed by a media assiduously courting their monetary support and by interests and officials seeking to manipulate their perceptions of reality, leaves people ever more open to the discouraging and paradoxical prospect of their own choices undermining the very rights and freedom on which their standing as citizens rests.

(Originally published January 19, 2015)

Notes

¹ "The Blind Men and the Elephant." Available at:

<http://dsh.cs.washington.edu/rywang/princeton/berkeley/258/parable.html>.

² "The Blind Man and the Elephant."

³ Lewis, C.S. 1943. *The Abolition of Man*. Originally published by New York: Oxford University Press, now in the public domain. A full electronic version is available at: <https://archive.org/stream/TheAbolitionOfMan/LewisC.S.TheAbolitionOfMan#page/n25/mode/2up/search/for+the+wise+men+of+old+the+cardinal+problem>.

51 The New Absolutism in American Politics

To observe American politics in recent weeks is to marvel at the new levels of extremism and partisanship to which it has fallen, and to lament the dogmatic absolutism that many in power within it now evidence and apparently believe both appropriate and likely to receive the approval of their primary constituencies. While it is not difficult to make the case that the nation now stands at something of a crossroads in its willingness even to try to govern itself, it is less clear which factors precisely have caused the current pass, or why so many of our elected leaders are willing to take steps to drive the nation ever more perilously toward an incapacity to address its compelling challenges. Indeed, if one takes seriously the wild rhetoric and actions of a share of these leaders, it is not altogether obvious that some wish to see the country continue to exist as one nation. A few examples from different domains make this point.

First, one must note House Speaker John Boehner's deeply misguided invitation to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to speak before a joint session of Congress without consulting President Barack Obama before doing so. Netanyahu indeed came to Washington, D.C., and once more, as presumably Boehner and Republican partisans desired, sought to critique as dangerous and misguided the Obama administration's present negotiations with Iran and other U.S. allies concerning inspection of that nation's nuclear program so as to avoid the attainment of atomic weapons. It apparently did not occur (or matter) to Boehner and other GOP leaders that those negotiations are still underway and that their invitation interfered in a profound way with the executive's capacity to represent the nation in foreign affairs. One central reason for the failure of the Articles of Confederation and the development of our nation's current Constitution was the former's incapacity to prevent a welter of just such efforts by the states and Congress.

In addition, Boehner and his colleagues surely knew that the Israeli leader has been predicting that Iran would develop a nuclear bomb "within months" since at least 1997 and that such had not come to pass, making his sweeping assertions somewhat less than credible, but that fact surely did not dissuade them from proceeding anyway. Finally, neither the House Speaker nor his colleagues, sabre rattling aside, seem to have a plan to address this vital

concern other than to undermine the President and his Secretary of State's good faith efforts to attend to it. So, the questions remain, why take this step and seek to undercut your country's chief executive on so grave a national security issue in so visible and so viciously partisan a way? And why now, when an agreement has not even been finalized?

Second, the GOP-led Congress was not content alone to repudiate the President by cheering Netanyahu as he thundered against negotiating with Iran. Forty-seven senators, including, sadly, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and John McCain, Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, chose to issue a public letter "informing" Iran's leaders that a new President (presumably a Republican) could vitiate in early 2017 any agreement reached in the current negotiations. Tom Cotton, a freshman senator from Arkansas with three months of legislative experience, drafted the letter. The apparent aim was to undermine the talks now in progress and prevent a bargain of any sort. Never mind that this effort violated constitutional principles and tradition, and that Congress would later review any accord reached. It is also not clear whether the legislators considered that their effort might actually gain the end desired and result in Iran abandoning talks in favor of what many hard-liners in that nation's government already want: a rush to develop a nuclear weapon. Perhaps *The New York Times* captured the character of this episode best by noting in an editorial that, "The letter was the latest shot to blow up the negotiations with Iran. ... Besides being willing to sabotage any deal with Iran (before they know the final details), these Republicans are perfectly willing to diminish America's standing as a global power capable of crafting international commitments and adhering to them."¹

Apart from their undercutting efforts in foreign policy, GOP leaders have taken similar steps to fan the flames of constitutional repudiation in another domain. The Party has taken every opportunity in recent memory at its meetings to open "discussions" about the federal government's supposed abrogation of "States' Rights," with many GOP officials sounding positively Calhoun-esque (referring to the South Carolina senator and author of the infamous "nullification" doctrine in the 1850s) in their rhetoric. One ongoing example is the Alabama Supreme Court's decision to order its probate courts not to abide by a federal district court decision to permit same sex marriages in that state. That state high court's choice follows on Alabama's similar misguided challenge to federal supremacy in immigration policy in recent years. Should other states follow its example, that state judiciary's action will

throw into question whether our nation's dual courts system can continue to work. No other state has chosen Alabama's course to date, but not because GOP officials are not persistently raising just such arguments. In fact, the underpinning of Alabama's claim seems quite similar to that on which many Republicans in Congress have lately been acting more generally: that they are somehow not part of the nation they are sworn to serve, but exist apart from it, and that that regime must be undone. Notably, during the last heyday of these sorts of arguments, at the height of the civil rights movement, not one state court chose to defy national supremacy in the way Alabama has in recent days. Whatever else may be made of the Alabama Supreme Court's recent choice, it is surely a radical one that attacks the principle that the national government is the supreme and only legitimate representative of the entire American people.

Even as the GOP has lately evidenced a fresh fanaticism in foreign policy, federalism and the legitimacy of the nation, its officials have likewise exhibited the tendency to absolutism and what might be dubbed "nation-hating" in other domestic policy realms. One example concerns the availability of armor-piercing bullets to the general public. President Ronald Reagan signed a law in 1986 directing the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATFE) to control who could obtain access to ammunition that could kill police wearing protective vests. The bill passed the House easily by a 400 to 21 margin and the President was actively supportive. The ATFE ultimately banned such ammunition for handguns, but allowed it for certain rifles used for sporting purposes on the theory that the latter were less likely to be used in crimes than handheld weapons. Some years ago, however, manufacturers began making handgun versions of their assault rifles and these new models could use the previously banned ammunition. To boost sales, the industry began to lobby ATFE to reclassify, as sporting weapons the assault-style handguns that use the outlawed ammunition. Last month, the Bureau published a draft framework seeking to outline which bullets it would continue to ban and which it would permit the general public to purchase. It did so explicitly on the grounds of protecting police officers from needless danger while simultaneously providing sports enthusiasts the opportunity to pursue their hobby.

The National Rifle Association quickly charged the ATFE with abusing its authority and likewise accused the President of being a "dictator" for seeking to draw a balance among competing claims and claimants in this way. Meanwhile, the conservative entertainment radio show host Rush

Limbaugh asserted, against all evidence to the contrary, that this was the Obama's administration's way of taking all guns from gun owners by taking away their ammunition, occasioning a storm of letters and a social media frenzy among concerned firearm owners. In response, more than half of the members of the House of Representatives (236 members), led by the GOP's Robert Goodlatte, of Virginia, sent a letter to the ATFE Director in early March informing him "The effects of these restrictive interpretations are untenable."²

Plainly, these congressmen were telling the Director that they were content to allow the potential for police to die rather than suggest that the Second Amendment was not absolute in character. Many of them did so, too, on the view that any thoughtful national regulation of such ammunition constituted "despotic" action and was per se illegitimate, a view apparently shared by many of their constituents. This said, it is worth noting that all of these claims, including Limbaugh's contention, have no basis in fact and that all were powered politically by absolutist paranoia. Nonetheless, the ATFE has now retreated under tremendous political pressure and will permit the sale of armor-piercing bullets that might be used by criminals with high-powered assault-style handguns. Today's GOP-led Congress is now willing to countenance this possibility, unlike Reagan who opined in 1986, "Certain forms of ammunition have no legitimate sporting, recreational or self-defense use and thus should be prohibited."³

One might add to these examples potential GOP 2016 presidential candidate Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's ongoing assault on his state's flagship university (and companion system). Walker has sought massive reductions in state support for the university on the view that it must serve the market more completely, a contention that imagines that the rightful arbiter of all things is what one perceives the market "wants." As the governor works assiduously to reduce public funding for the University of Wisconsin system, he is in fact ensuring that it will operate more like a private firm, a trend also occurring in most other states. Overall, Walker is redefining higher education as a purely private good in his state that will serve the perceived immediate needs of the market, imagining those can be discerned. The contention beneath these assertions is unproven, but it nonetheless is predicated on the view that society is best off rationing higher education on the basis of ability to pay, and that the only knowledge worth knowing is that which the market appears presently to value. Hidden within these assumptions lies another: that somehow classification of higher education

as a public good is illegitimate because democratic governance itself is somehow insufficient.

Taken together, these examples suggesting a deepening radicalism and paranoia afoot in American politics. That new politics is now tied ever more closely to clarion calls for the delegitimation not only of democratic responsibility, but also for its supposed ready substitution by the market. GOP leaders in particular have adopted this perspective and tied these assertions to assaults on the possibility of national governance especially, but also on democratic governance more generally. It is by now evident that these officials are pursuing a dangerous path for freedom, one that led the nation previously to grievous ignominy in the period of the Articles of Confederation and later, to brutal civil war. These precedents are clear and sobering. What is less obvious is why so many voters seem to be prepared to support this peculiar blend of dogmatic and absolutist partisanship, frenzied paranoia, prejudice and willed ignorance. Its continued vitality augurs an ugly time ahead for American politics.

(Originally published March 15, 2015)

Notes

¹ Editorial Board. 2015. "Republican Idiocy on Iran," *The New York Times*, March 11. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/12/opinion/republican-idiocy-on-iran.html>.

² U.S. House of Representatives. Letter to Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Director B. Todd Jones, March 4, 2015, p.2. Available at: <https://shared.nrapvf.org/sharedmedia/1507341/letter-to-atf-director-jones-apa-framework-final.pdf>.

³ Reagan, Ronald. 1986. "Statement on signing the bill to regulate armor-piercing ammunition," August. 28. The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum website. Available at: <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/082886b.htm>.

52 Institutionalizing ‘Doublethink’ and the Challenge of Democratic Deliberation

In April 1946, George Orwell published in the journal *Horizon* what has since become perhaps his most celebrated essay, “Politics and the English Language.”¹ The author had completed *Animal Farm*² the previous year and would soon set to work on his masterwork, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,³ when he penned this article. The “Politics” essay represented a call to arms of a sort, in which Orwell enjoined all English language writers to write as simply and clearly as possible. He offered his argument not only for its own sake, but also in the name of ensuring the possibility of truly democratic politics. In particular, Orwell decried complex and wordy constructions that did little besides cloud meaning and intent, as illustrated by this example by a well-known professor of English of the time: “Above all, we cannot play ducks and drakes with a native battery of idioms which prescribes egregious collocations of vocables as the Basic put up with for tolerate, or put at a loss for bewilde.”⁴

Such writing, Orwell contended, is ever stale and imprecise. Its vagueness and incompetence had become in his view, the “most marked characteristic of modern English prose.”⁵ If this was true generally, Orwell reserved special venom for what he called political writing:

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. ... In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.⁶

This argument presaged his much more developed contention in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which found Big Brother deliberately obscuring speech and engaging in wholesale attempts to manipulate and misinform the citizenry

in often heinous ways, but most deeply and disturbingly by depriving individuals of their capacity for independent thought altogether. Writing when he did, in the aftermath of a horrific world war that had seen propaganda unleashed on a scale theretofore unimagined, Orwell placed a carefully circumscribed hope in the power of clear language to prevent the continued degradation of freedom by such artifice. As he memorably put this point,

[O]ne ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.⁷

Columbia University School of Journalism professor and *New Yorker* staff writer Nicholas Lemann developed this argument in a thoughtful analysis of Orwell's "Politics" essay in 2007. There, he distinguished helpfully between pompous ambiguity in political rhetoric and willful propaganda, and contended that while both were likely to undermine any sort of genuine deliberative political dialogue the latter was the more dangerous of the two since it could be both eloquent and persuasive.⁸ Lemann specifically cited President George W. Bush's September 30, 2001, address introducing the "War on Terror" as an example. That speech placed the United States in a state of undefined and unending war against enemies of freedom, rather than any specific nation or group. As Orwell had before him, Lemann expressed hope that political rhetoric of all stripes was at least subject to debate in the public square, where ideas would compete for salience and could be tested for their truthful content.

While I share this expectation, I have lately begun to wonder how far it may extend and with what relative efficacy when so many actors entering the public theater come armed not only with artful rhetoric and often propaganda, but also with an abiding belief in the absolute truth of their views and a similar perspective on the errancy, villainy or worse of their

perceived opponents. In this crucible, all strategies and tactics are fair game—truthful, obscurantist or untrue alike—as they are perceived by their transmitters as advancing the “righteous” in the face of the “malignant.” That is, political propaganda, as Lemann and Orwell defined it, surely characterizes a strong share of today’s political rhetoric.

Here are a few examples. President Ronald Reagan, who had gained office by demonizing government, taxes and taxation, relabeled a tax increase he came to embrace as a need for “revenue enhancements” in an effort to obscure the character of his action. Among the many morally repugnant dimensions of the George W. Bush administration’s embrace of torture was its attempt to relabel those acts for the public as “enhanced interrogation.” A law designed to increase our national government’s capacities to engage in surveillance of its people and that decreased that population’s civil liberties was purposely called the USA Patriot Act by the George W. Bush administration to disguise its aims. Meanwhile, that same presidency’s so-called No Child Left Behind educational “reform” law has resulted in precisely the opposite of its supposed aspiration for millions of children. Likewise, some 22 GOP-controlled states have enacted stricter voter identification laws justified publicly and vigorously as efforts to address the (factually non-existent) “scourge” of vote fraud. These have resulted in a disproportionate decline in voting by minority groups especially, a population less likely on average to vote for Republican candidates, a plainly partisan aim. One other example of this sort of propagandistic “doublethink,” as Orwell labeled it in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are state laws supposedly aimed at “protecting” the religious freedom of Christian social conservatives vis-à-vis gay, lesbian and transgender individuals. These statutes have lately been roundly and rightly attacked as an artifice instead designed to permit continued discrimination against such groups by an important GOP constituency.

These examples suggest that the concern that Orwell raised is real. Political interests, corporations and elected leaders all now employ doublethink and deliberately misleading rhetoric and propaganda for profit and to gain and maintain power. Each also strives to outdo its “opponents” in its shrill claims regarding purportedly dreaded “others,” purveyors of all manner of (mostly) imagined maladies.

There is much evidence that large swathes of the U.S. electorate are typically uninformed about politics and policymaking at all scales and that major sections of the population are splintering among media outlets and

political leaders offering simplistic sloganeering as alternatives to governance. The fact that many of these individuals and entities also deliberately propagate doublethink in their mobilization efforts is a matter of urgent democratic concern. One may ask, as Orwell did, that the purveyors of these half-truths and false claims stop offering them because they are immoral, but the evidence today suggests that a positive response to such requests is unlikely, for the obvious reason that propagandizing seems to “work.” “Work” in this context connotes political power and profits, extremely alluring incentives for the corporations and public officials so engaged.

Finally, Lemann has also suggested that a deeper concern than Orwell's fear of a politics suffused by knowing misinformation and doublethink is the fact that some individuals control information and data on which others must rely to engage in anything resembling a public deliberative conversation. The difficulty for democracy is only compounded when public officials or representatives of other interests calculatingly distort and mislead people concerning the information only they possess, for ideological or other purposes. Lemann cited the fact that Saddam Hussein never possessed an ability to produce weapons of mass destruction and that many of those who argued otherwise to rally the U.S. to war knew the truth when they did so. Those officials nonetheless used the argument to manipulate public opinion to secure other purposes.

It seems fitting during this anniversary month of publication of Orwell's essay to ponder how well situated our polity is today to counter the obvious efforts of many interests within it to practice just the tactics and strategies that he warned would prove so dangerous to democratic deliberation. There is much evidence that Orwell was prescient and too little that Americans and their current politics are appropriately situated to address his vital concerns. Too many U.S. citizens today instead find themselves enmeshed in a persisting and absolutist tidal rush of doublethink and fear mongering, unable to make decisions on the basis of anything like a steady moral compass or purposive democratic reasoning.

(Originally published April 12, 2015)

Notes

¹ Orwell, George. 1946. “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon* (April). At Portfolio (website). Available at: <http://www.resort.com/~prime8/Orwell/patee.html>. This essay was one of 100 articles the then free-lancing

Orwell produced in 1946.

² Orwell, George. 1945. *Animal Farm*. London: Secker and Warburg.

³ Orwell, George. 1949. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Secker and Warburg.

⁴ Orwell, "Politics and the English Language."

⁵ Orwell, "Politics and the English Language."

⁶ Orwell, "Politics and the English Language."

⁷ Orwell, "Politics and the English Language."

⁸ Lemann, Nicholas. 2007. "The Limits of Clear Language," *The Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December. Available at: http://www.cjr.org/essay/the_limits_of_language.php.

53 Another Turn of the Wheel

As the 2016 Presidential campaign begins in earnest, it is clear that it will be waged along now familiar fault lines in so far as its candidates address the question of income inequality in the country. For many conservatives the issue is not income inequality, but hypothesized deficiencies, either of character or of educational-market “mismatch” or both, among the poor and those individuals suffering long-term unemployment. These lawmakers and candidates are vociferously against any attempted governmental redress of income inequality, such as raising the wealthiest citizens’ tax rates or providing assistance or other support to the poor or long unemployed. Politicians of this cast of mind are content to live with rising levels of income inequality and wealth concentration in the nation on the grounds that those advantaged by this continuing shift are “job creators” and public interventions would only prevent them from working their employment-related magic by reallocating resources these individuals otherwise could utilize far more efficiently.

In any case, these officials and candidates suggest, “we all know” that government efforts to assist the poor or to redress market failures have always disappointed in the past. When these arguments are challenged, conservatives turn to a now recurring refrain that government is growing and in tyrannical ways, as evidenced by the often-pilloried Affordable Care Act or by President Barack Obama’s efforts to stimulate the economy when it was mired in deep recession. Alongside these claims, and as evidence for their negative orientation regarding any public effort to redress growing income inequality or poverty and want specifically, these individuals criticize those citizens who accept such services as “dependent,” “users” or lazy. In sum, proponents of continuing upward redistribution of income and wealth in society first argue that concern about this trend is misplaced, and next suggest that government is ill equipped to address it and is itself the agent of far worse in social terms. When these contentions are challenged in turn, proponents assert that the impoverished or hungry individuals themselves are alone to blame for their situations, and for that reason they are undeserving of the support of their fellow citizens. According to this view, people in such situations should confront the conditions besetting them and overcome their circumstances by dint of their own efforts and, failing that,

they should be content to live in the state their initiative permits, as they surely “deserve” that outcome.

These arguments merit at least brief comment. On the issue of recent government interventions to assist citizens as being per se deeply problematic, empirical evidence suggests that these claims are at best miscast. Despite continuing conservative allegations, such as declaring that improving health care access for those who could not afford it would find government “taking over” that market or would raise prices unsustainably and prove bankrupting to program participants, none of these supposed “certainties” have occurred. Instead, experience to date suggests that insurance premiums and health care costs are now rising more slowly than they did before the Act’s passage, that the effort is not costing even what was originally envisaged and millions of people are obtaining access to medical care without “bankrupting” the nation in the process. Moreover, there is no evidence that government has “taken anyone’s freedom” from them in this initiative, despite dire warnings to the contrary from those pressing such arguments. Nonetheless, this program remains a favorite target of criticism among conservative leaders and officials.

On the related claim that the federal government was wrong—under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, although only the latter is criticized on these grounds by GOP candidates and officials, for perhaps obvious partisan reasons—to intervene to steady the nation’s fiscal ship, virtually all economists disagree. Most well-regarded analysts, in fact, argue the nation should have spent more and faster to stimulate the economy in the face of very high unemployment in the recent Great Recession, but such was not possible due to implacable and impassioned GOP opposition on the grounds the country “could not afford” to undertake such efforts. It is plain in retrospect that this stance was profoundly mistaken and caused millions of citizens to endure unnecessary suffering. In this domain, too, the officials trumpeting these arguments have not acknowledged their error or suggested that perhaps an alternate and less dogmatic course was appropriate. Instead, most have heaped disdain on Obama as the architect of so wasteful and unneeded an initiative while also blaming him, and by extension, government, for any continuing unemployment and wage stagnation. In fact, both joblessness and wage levels would have been worse had these critics successfully prevented countercyclical action by the national government.

The story is the same when considering how conservatives regard assistance to the poor and unemployed. At least since President Ronald Reagan, GOP leaders have argued that the nation's effort, begun under President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 to address widespread poverty, failed. Indeed, Reagan often quipped that the nation had sought to eliminate poverty and poverty had won. In that former governor's view, this was so in no small part because government could never be the agent of effective amelioration of poverty; only the market could do that. But as it happens, this statement is also empirically false. A recent exhaustive and dispassionate analysis of the War on Poverty¹ found that, while hardly perfect—Johnson rightly warned it could not be at its launch, since the effort was unprecedented—the campaign improved the lives of millions of people across the nation. Far from being the agent of wasteful immiseration and character destruction conservatives so often purport these programs to be, public efforts have ameliorated the suffering of large numbers of Americans. Nonetheless, many in the GOP today tar all programs to assist citizens in distress as wasteful handouts that breed laziness, dependency and misuse. Importantly, this argument rests principally on a misguided and too often spiteful, ideological certainty.

The broader point is that when today's conservative certitudes are subjected to careful analysis they dissolve into

- Attacks on self-governance as unnecessary, as it can be replaced by a market that somehow can make democracy itself obsolete
- Unsubstantiated claims that government intervention will always result in pernicious, wasteful or worse results
- Criticisms of specific groups of citizens as somehow lacking because they are poor or unemployed or otherwise “unproductive” when measured against an economic calculus, laying aside all other causal factors and circumstances as irrelevant.

As I have remarked in prior commentaries, these are not arguments about more or less government action, or what form of public effort might prove most effective to address a specific social challenge, or about which level of government should undertake a responsibility. Instead they represent far broader and deeper ideological claims that Americans need not assume responsibility to govern themselves as a people or care about the circumstances of anyone but themselves. That is, as this national campaign

begins, the central issue the polity is increasingly being asked to confront is whether it is prepared to believe, against readily available empirical evidence to the contrary, in a myth that a people need not govern itself and likewise may not acknowledge the fact it is one nation.

Put differently, for many ardent ideologues on the right, the coming presidential election is not about reality, but about an imaginary scenario created by a continuing fusillade of rhetoric and belief that find them willing to excoriate millions of people for their supposed lassitude and to allow and even encourage still greater levels of wealth and income inequality, all in the hope it will yield the magic bullet of economic growth. Never mind that there is very little evidence for this assertion in the decades in which it has been the regnant ideal of the conservative movement and that it risks destroying the social fabric on which freedom itself depends. These advocates have no doubt that governance itself is the nation's greatest villain. Somehow, these proponents seem to contend, one can break the bonds joining citizens, persistently denigrate self-governance and delegitimize its only commonly shared instrument and nonetheless expect the people so inclined to remain vigorous and free.

In my view, this is not a partisan question. It is rather an issue of whether a people will countenance the continued degradation of the ties that unite them and the only agent that can act legitimately on their behalf. As this new campaign begins, the central democratic question is whether the populace will once more begin to take responsibility for its governance or continue instead to take solace in fantasies that it can foreswear that obligation.

(Originally published May 11, 2015)

Notes

- ¹ Bailey, Martha J. and Sheldon Danziger. 2013. *Legacies of the War on Poverty*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

54 Of False Analogies, Fabled Claims and Caution Flags

Likely GOP presidential candidate Jeb Bush's inability to articulate for reporters what he thinks about the Iraq War that the United States initiated in 2003 at the behest of his brother, George W. Bush, when the latter was president, has unleashed a torrent of criticism of the younger Bush, his older sibling and that conflict. Pundits of all stripes have been weighing in on these topics. *New York Times* columnist and New York University professor Paul Krugman, for example, has suggested that the rationale for the war in Iraq, such as it was, was built on deliberate lies.¹ But Krugman was not so certain about why President Bush pressed for war on the basis of now roundly criticized claims, assumptions and intelligence.

Likewise, the always outspoken *Rolling Stone* columnist Matt Taibbi has argued that many journalists and editors knew even at the time (2003) the Bush White House was pressing the case for war that its justifications did not make sense and could not succeed as envisioned.² But Taibbi, too, found it difficult to explain why the Bush administration had proceeded anyway, and why skeptics did not prevent the president's decision to launch the conflict. For his part, David Brooks of *The New York Times* has sought to set aside the question of whether President Bush misled the nation and to argue instead that Americans can and should learn from our collective past mistakes and, more particularly, that one lesson of the Iraq war failure should be that citizens should be wary of leaders seeking broad-scale change.³ Finally, Roger Cohen, also writing in *The Times*, has argued that Americans need to recall and seek to learn from the past, but do so in a way that does not obsess about history and instead simultaneously looks ahead to the future.⁴

I have found these arguments fascinating as they are characterized by a certain dualism. Commentators first appear to make a judgment concerning whether the Bush White House decision to press for war was a deliberate effort to mislead the nation, and second and thereafter, to seek to describe or explain the character of the chosen course. Just like President Bush and his advisors, all of these writers have used analogical reasoning to justify their attempts to make sense of the tragic choices those earlier principals elected. Paradoxically perhaps, one would normally applaud such logic, as

it represents perhaps the most sophisticated form of cognition. But, in this case, this type of reasoning was wrongly or misleadingly applied and interpreted, and large numbers of Americans were persuaded to support a disastrous policy course for their nation and for Iraq and its region. This fact points to a deeper issue in United States politics, the common use of false analogies to justify policy decisions, and the challenge that presents to democratic deliberation. A few illustrations may illuminate the ubiquity of this concern.

Consider, for example, the number of candidates who run for executive and other public offices each year in the U.S. claiming that their experience in a for-profit firm “meeting payroll” equips them for political responsibility. This sort of rhetoric implies that government can and should be operated as a private business. But this analogy is patently false, as government is not a business and much of what it does will never earn a profit, nor is it intended to do so. Indeed, the very purpose of the vast majority of public entities is to deliver services or goods otherwise not available in the marketplace. Moreover, the lion’s share of public organizations depends on legislative appropriations and not fees or the sale of services. Nonetheless, prospective and current office-holders employ this business-experience argument frequently in efforts to convince voters of their fitness for office. They do so because so many citizens are already persuaded that the analogy is “true.” In fact, whenever used, this argument instead should encourage voters to conclude such individuals are unfit to serve. Nevertheless, such claims typically go unchallenged.

Another common example of the “phenomenon of the false analogy” may be seen in political leaders’ arguments that the federal budget can be seen as directly analogous to household spending and therefore costs may never exceed revenues. This contention has a very long history and millions of voters take it as fact. Nevertheless, the analogy underpinning this claim, too, is false. Economists for generations have taught that the national government need not always balance its budget, and indeed should not do so when necessary, if it is to react reasonably to help to address normal economic cycles. In short, such arguments are simply not true. More deeply, to the extent that the policies arising from these injunctions are followed zealously, they can and have imposed needless hardships on the populations that have supported them. It is also clear such claims are used to secure outcomes that otherwise might be deeply unpopular. In this sense, they

represent a form of untransparent politics that is innately inimical to democracy.

Still another exemplar of this form of poor reasoning by analogy occurs when would-be leaders or officials suggest that “all” of some category or phenomena are alike and should be treated accordingly in policy and programmatic choices, e.g., all immigrants are “bad” and either in the United States to take Americans’ jobs or engaged in some other sort of nefariousness. Similarly, some elected leaders and officials often contend that all who are poor “are dependent” and “lazy” or worse. These sorts of arguments are deeply pernicious and empirically false, but nonetheless widely and successfully employed to mobilize many voters who accept them at face value.

These widespread “truisms” not only rally individuals around non-existent or inappropriate concerns, but they also result in blunt, hurtful or worse policy and program choices. In effect, in these cases, individuals are exhorted to support decisions that impose costs on themselves or on other specific groups in the name of incorrect certainties and inapt logic. All of this creates a mediated echo chamber in which citizens are persuaded to support courses of action that bear little or no factual relationship to reality and which are justified on the basis of errant analogies.

Given their omnipresence, these false arguments represent a difficult challenge to achieving anything approaching democratic deliberation in our country. In these scenarios, many voters are already convinced of falsehoods built on faulty analogies, setting up a temptation for guileful or cynical actors to use citizen ignorance to further their own quests for personal or partisan power. While one might wish that electoral leaders would discipline their behavior and not use these situations to their personal benefit, there is little evidence, now or in the past, that these leaders are willing consistently to do so. Instead, many seek to exploit voter misunderstanding to further their ideological or policy preferences. Indeed, their willingness to do so is often thereafter debated as a question of malevolent intentionality or misguided adherence to ideologies or false shibboleths, as in the case of the George W. Bush administration and the Iraq war.

But the vexing issue of how to address this concern remains, especially if we cannot rely on candidates and officials to inform voters. Widespread embrace of untrue analogies represents a situation in which millions are convinced of erroneous arguments and claims. One might, finally, take recourse in education. But only 39 percent of Americans between 25 and

64 possess a two-year or baccalaureate degree and not all of these will take courses in economics or politics or sociology in which they might read about these concerns and understand them, and question and debunk inappropriate analogies. Or, perhaps teachers in secondary school could tackle this challenge and teach these subjects more thoroughly, but the current emphasis on reading and STEM subjects for standardized tests makes this unlikely. Likewise, in theory, parents could help, but too many are already convinced themselves of these supposed certitudes. That leaves the press, which certainly could do a better job of challenging this deceptive rhetoric when it is employed in the public discourse. But some media outlets exist to promote specific political perspectives and are unlikely to play such a watchdog role when such arguments support their owner's agendas, while others may be cowed into silence by political leaders bent on a specific course, as Taibbi has argued happened to many writers and editors in the period prior to the Iraq conflict. In addition, although Taibbi did not so contend, it may be that many newspapers and news outlets no longer possess the resources to engage in explanatory and investigative journalism, since the great share are now pressed to provide profits for parent corporations with other interests foremost.

This analysis suggests the texture and singular complexity implicit in addressing the challenge of democratic deliberation. Good governance, as the elective choice to launch the failed Iraq war sadly illustrated, depends on honest and deliberative leaders, a watchful press and an informed and judicious citizenry. When these factors are not present or cannot be secured with some measure of consistency, policy injustices and courses can and will occur that are not merely the product of simple miscalculation or a lack of knowledge, but of intention and power gone awry. These represent caution flags for a self-governing people. We may owe Jeb Bush a collective thank you for his doubtless politically difficult and unintended reminder of this reality. The surge of reflection his remarks has unleashed is refreshing to see. It is also necessary to a vital public conversation of the always relevant matter of how to secure a democratically deliberative politics.

(Originally published May 25, 2015)

Notes

- ¹ Krugman, Paul. 2015. "Errors and Lies," *The New York Times*, May 15. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/18/opinion/paul-krugman-errors-and-lies.html>.

² Taibbi, Matt. 2015. “Forget what we know now: We knew then the Iraq War was a Joke,” *Rolling Stone*, May 19. Available at:

<http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/30252-forget-what-we-know-now-we-knew-then-the-iraq-war-was-a-joke>.

³ Brooks, David. 2015. “Learning from Mistakes,” *The New York Times*, May 19. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/19/opinion/david-brooks-learning-from-mistakes.html>.

⁴ Cohen, Roger. 2015. “The Presence of the Past,” *The New York Times*, May 18. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/19/opinion/roger-cohen-the-presence-of-the-past.html>.

55 The Once and Future Perils of Popular Rule

One of the more significant and vexing features of democracy is its foundation in majoritarianism. Few political thinkers before our Founders were willing to embrace this form of government because of its long track record of dissolution into either majority or autocratic tyranny. Only a relative handful of government leaders before our nation's Framers believed that the populace, even hedged about as its reach and rights originally were in our Constitution, could be trusted to self-govern. Political theorists and public officials had long been convinced that individuals could not be trusted to discipline their emotions and appetites sufficiently to ensure the rights of their fellow citizens against the raw drives of self-interest, ruthless desire for power, avarice and rationalization. Nonetheless, and appropriately, if not always readily, we have expanded our franchise steadily since our nation's creation to include all of those individuals originally excluded, but the underlying challenge, not to say imperative remains: to ensure a prudential citizenry. And that aspiration is as difficult to attain now as ever.

The following brief analysis treats several of the most important factors that mediate how reasoned our democratic polity might be expected to be in its choices. First, for good and ill, members of political parties govern the country, and the basic reason for the existence of those groups is to mobilize voters to secure sufficient popular support to rule. That aim, along with the widespread belief that it is better for the nation when one party enjoys sufficient legislative numbers to ensure its way, assigns a special responsibility to voters. Citizens must obtain an accurate and dispassionate measure of the parties to ensure that none takes steps to pad its future electoral fortunes at the expense of certain citizens or by using human biases, smallness and emotions to win power.

History teaches that many autocrats have won or retained power by defaming minorities in their nations, including the present regime in Myanmar, Milosevic in Serbia, ISIL in Iraq, Hitler in Germany and many more. They have done so on the basis of appeals to identity categories and emotions, including nation, tribe, ethnicity, religion, race, caste, economic status, fear, anxiety, hatred and jealousy, among others. Democracy asks much of those who would self-govern by giving them responsibility to guard

against their own potential proclivities to accept these sorts of appeals in favor of allegiance to more abstract, and admittedly more challenging principles calling for the preservation of individual rights and freedom. That this is difficult is demonstrated by how often citizens have succumbed to anti-democratic appeals. In our country, such calls have recently been to raw fear and prejudice against immigrants, the impoverished and governance, and through forms of racial and economic stereotyping and discrimination.

Second, this profound and ongoing challenge to democracy points to two additional factors that play key roles in determining democratic electoral outcomes. It is ironic that even as more Americans have been granted the formal right to vote, many citizens never or only fitfully exercise that opportunity. Low turnout, especially in primaries in both parties, often results in voters who support candidates with the most strident views actually voting. Primary voters' numbers are quite small relative to the total electorate, but they play disproportionately large roles in determining party nominees and policy trajectory. Not surprisingly, they also tend to be the most ideological of the nation's citizens.

Third, the challenge of popular rule is exacerbated by the reality that our political leaders have become ever more adept at framing issues in elections in ways designed solely to persuade. At least since the 1968 presidential contest, candidates have worked closely with advisors to "package" themselves carefully around emotional as well as policy claims that reflect ideology and at least some share of their party and the general electorate's bases' abiding beliefs and prejudices. Campaign operatives have learned much about using anger, shame, name-calling and other basic human potentials to craft positive perspectives of "their" candidate and unflattering or negative views of their opponents. Those pressing their interests and ideological beliefs are unlikely any time soon to foreswear using "what works" to gain support and votes, whatever that entails (well-known examples include the "Willie Horton" George H. W. Bush political ad and the Swiftboat campaign aimed at delegitimizing the heroism of John Kerry, then a Democratic Party presidential nominee).

Moreover, in recent decades many GOP partisans have argued persistently and with increasing stridency that governance is an impediment both to individual freedom and to the market offering still more benefits to Americans. This orientation and these arguments have left some adherents of that party's off shoots, including those identifying with the so-called Tea Party, certain, for example, that the government will soon act to take away

their right to own all types of weapons, or will shortly cede the nation's sovereignty to a supposed world government. Neither of these claims has any basis in reality, but both have been used quite effectively by advocates and campaigns to mobilize citizens to the polls to support candidates pledged to prevent these imagined likelihoods, and otherwise to do what they can to prevent effective governance, seen as the purveyor of undue regulation and personalized deprivations of freedom. These and similar groups' belief in fabricated or exaggerated propositions, false certainty and shrillness have created a major challenge to democratic self-governance in recent years.

Fourth, the parties are not alone in their sophistication in campaign mobilization strategies. Advocacy groups of all stripes have become adroit in crafting their claims to maximize their popular appeal and often deliberately to mislead in so doing. Indeed, such organizations are now frequently the direct and indirect progeny of economic and monied interests who have been given virtually *carte blanche* by the U.S. Supreme Court to use their resources in efforts to influence elections. This turn has resulted in the parties becoming more reliant on a small group of individuals willing to expend vast personal sums in the name of their ideological and economic interests. The Koch Brothers, for example, billionaires with interests in petro-chemicals and with deeply libertarian beliefs, have publicly indicated they and a close network of allies will spend \$900 million to support a GOP presidential nominee pledged to support their views in the coming election cycle. They have already contributed strong financial support to likely Republican Party candidate Scott Walker, Governor of Wisconsin, and his efforts to declare unions a national "problem" and menace to economic growth. The Kochs have indicated they will provide ongoing funding to Walker, and indeed one of the brothers has already suggested that he is sure the governor will be the Republican presidential standard bearer in 2016.

In short, in the face of the foundational fragility of majoritarianism and popular rule, the need for an informed and judicious electorate has ever been significant if self-governance is to be preserved. These challenges to democracy are now as powerful as they have ever been in our nation's history. As noted above, candidates for office at all scales now do little without the "professional" counsel of individuals aimed solely at helping them mobilize support through "smart" appeals to targeted groups. In addition, advocacy organizations have been granted virtually unfettered access to campaigns, and their fiscal and substantive contributions have

reached unprecedented levels. With little effective regulation of these groups' expenditures, much election contest support is provided without public transparency or accountability, making it significantly more difficult for voters to fashion intelligent probative choices. And there are now essentially no limits on the amounts that individuals may "invest" in political campaigns, raising the specter of what those people expect for their millions, should their favorites win office. Finally, both major parties' ongoing devotion to neoliberal tenets concerning the rightful primacy to be accorded the market in most social choice-making has resulted in one of those parties, the GOP, adopting the more extreme view that government itself is little more than a malevolent force in society (except for defense) that serves only to impede economic growth and individual freedom.

To all of these factors confronting continued effective popular rule I might add one more. Not only do many Americans not vote, but many more citizens are also simply uninformed about even the most basic fundamentals of their nation's regime. Too many cannot name their state or national representatives, and even fewer are aware of local elected lawmakers. Some, sadly, cannot even call the President's name to mind.¹ Given these realities, it is difficult not to conclude that the citizenry is more susceptible than ever to manipulation, and those with interests—either in accruing power or in securing control over potential action or both—now possess resources, tools and knowledge that position them better than ever before to influence voters. Yet, it is too easy to conclude that voters should become more vigilant and informed, as there are few indicators such will occur soon. Perhaps paradoxically, for now, hope must lie with the federal courts rethinking their views on the role of money in politics, and with lawmakers themselves realizing the dangers of the current situation for the regime they were elected to serve and for popular rule, and calling for change accordingly.

(Originally published June 22, 2015)

Notes

¹ Annenberg Public Policy Center. 2014. "Americans know surprisingly little about their government, survey finds," Available at: <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-know-surprisingly-little-about-their-government-survey-finds/>.

56 A Pope's Plea for the Commons, Democratic Governance and Social Justice

Pope Francis recently issued a passionate and far-ranging 137,000-word encyclical that, according to some reports, is among the longest such teaching documents in Church history. The Pope ranged widely in this effort—entitled *Laudato Si' or On Care for our Common Home*—to address a diverse array of topics, including the fact that environmental degradation and global warming are continuing apace.¹ He also touched on urban planning, banking regulation and Trinitarian theology, among other subjects. By embracing the scientific consensus concerning global warming early in the document, Pope Francis angered many American Roman Catholics who have aligned themselves with the view that such is not really occurring and is instead the product of misguided or misanthropic intellectuals or, as GOP presidential aspirant Jeb Bush recently opined, the product of the “intellectual arrogance” of the scientists sharing the results of their studies.²

In fairness to Bush, he was merely echoing the dogma of the primary voters of his Party. None of the dozen or so presidential aspirants for the Republican Party presidential nomination thus far has embraced climate change as an overwhelmingly human-created reality since the ideological right and conservative media, to whom their party and potential victory are in thrall, have made such a stance a partisan litmus test. However much it strains credulity, these dozen or so individuals have all gone along with the view that human beings are not principally responsible for degrading the planet or its atmosphere, or for causing the extinction of species each day by dint of their short term foci and unwillingness to address the full environmental costs of their embrace of consumerism and marketization.

Apart from this early section of the encyclical, which has received disproportionate media attention, Francis' overarching goal in the document was to identify the underlying factors creating our current ecological and governance crises worldwide. Despite the fact that *Laudato Si* will likely be known as Francis' “environmental” Encyclical, it is that broader analysis that I find penetrating and most significant about his effort.

The Pontiff views the present growing global ecological crisis as the consequence of Western “throwaway” cultures, corporate greed and a self-wrought and profound imbalance in the political economies of those nations caught up in consumerism and marketization for their own sake.³ These socially debilitating choices have been spread throughout the world via trade and too often unbalanced and/or ineffectual international agreements and institutions. Here is how he puts the matter in one section of *On Care for our Common Home*:

What happens with politics? Let us keep in mind the principle of subsidiarity, which grants freedom to develop the capabilities present at every level of society, while also demanding a greater sense of responsibility for the common good from those who wield greater power. Today, it is the case that some economic sectors exercise more power than states themselves. But economics without politics cannot be justified, since this would make it impossible to favour other ways of handling the various aspects of the present crisis. The mindset which leaves no room for sincere concern for the environment is the same mindset which lacks concern for the inclusion of the most vulnerable members of society. For ‘the current model, with its emphasis on success and self-reliance, does not appear to favour an investment in efforts to help the slow, the weak or the less talented to find opportunities in life.’⁴

In a passage that neatly describes a key overarching trend in U.S. politics in recent years, Francis observed:

Politics and the economy tend to blame each other when it comes to poverty and environmental degradation. It is to be hoped that they can acknowledge their own mistakes and find forms of interaction directed to the common good. While some are concerned only with financial gain, and others with holding on to or increasing their power, what we are left with are conflicts or spurious agreements where the last thing either party is concerned about is caring for the environment and protecting those who are most vulnerable.⁵

As if evidencing the Pope’s concern, GOP lawmakers particularly have blamed the 2007 economic crash on a president who had nothing to do with it while arguing for less, not more, government regulation of the firms whose

leaders' persistent calls for deregulation and whose wildly risky investment behavior brought ruin to many and nearly a fresh depression. Indeed, many Republican lawmakers today routinely decry any government economic regulation as constituting an undue claim on "job creators," and rail against governance generally as the equivalent of an embarrassing and outdated old buggy in the garage that prevents the market from securing the magic it otherwise would provide. Francis exposes this sort of thinking for the dangerous fantasy it is and argues eloquently for a proper balancing of politics and the economy in which the first is always architectonic. This strikes the reader particularly, as it amounts to a devastating critique of the current situation in America and many other nations in which many lawmakers daily denigrate self-governance and the poor and vulnerable in the name of a market-centered conception of individual freedom.

As examples of this propensity, one might cite Ronald Reagan's famous presidential inaugural declaration that government represented the nation's greatest problem, 2012 GOP presidential standard-bearer Mitt Romney's infamous argument that 47 percent of the nation's population simply do not count as they will never be anything but "dependent," Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's recent stereotyping and outrageous assertion that Mexico's migrants are rapists and GOP presidential nomination seeker Rand Paul's equally contemptible decision to meet with Clive Bundy, the Nevada rancher who saw fit to place armed militia in sniper positions to "defend his property" (owned by the United States) against government officials whose authority he does not recognize. One might well ask why Paul, a sitting U.S. Senator, believed this consultation was appropriate and further, what he sought to accomplish electorally with it.

Francis points up the uncomfortable reality that the political and economic challenge now confronting the West has only grown as large numbers of its leaders, often backed by corporate interests, have embraced an ever more thorough marketization of their societies. These officials increasingly count self-governance and human dignity as neither appropriate, nor necessary. All that counts, in their view, is market success and the supposed liberty to press one's claims in the market place. In this ideologically framed view, those who fail and the many vulnerable groups who cannot "play" in this game are blamed as personally weak or inadequate and themselves alone the cause of their status. That is, in this view, these individuals may be unfortunate, but they remain undeserving social detritus. Here is how Pope Francis framed the imperative to change this orientation:

If we want to bring about deep change, we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behaviour. Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature. Otherwise, the paradigm of consumerism will continue to advance, with the help of the media and the highly effective workings of the market.⁶

And again,

Not everyone is called to engage directly in political life. Society is also enriched by a countless array of organizations, which work to promote the common good and to defend the environment, whether natural or urban. Some, for example, show concern for a public place (a building, a fountain, an abandoned monument, a landscape, a square), and strive to protect, restore, improve or beautify it as something belonging to everyone. Around these community actions, relationships develop or are recovered and a new social fabric emerges. Thus, a community can break out of the indifference induced by consumerism. These actions cultivate a shared identity with a story, which can be remembered and handed on. In this way, the world, and the quality of life of the poorest, are cared for, with a sense of solidarity, which is at the same time aware that we live in a common home, which God has entrusted to us.⁷

For more than three decades now, and with growing intensity, our nation has embraced a view of politics that suggests it is somehow unnecessary and that all that is significant in our personal and collective lives is bound up in our individual roles in the market place. Those who do not succeed in the market have frequently been declared unworthy and inequality has grown to a virtually unprecedented degree, even as lawmakers pretend citizens do not need to make tough choices to ensure their freedom and futures and the polity can, with impunity, discriminate against and assail minorities and those less fortunate among them as they proceed. Pope Francis' profoundly insightful and challenging Encyclical should remind all lovers of freedom and self-governance that these cannot endure without citizens willing to recognize they live within broader national and global societies and how they live their lives each day has repercussions for untold numbers of people beyond themselves.

The Pope's passionate argument for a rebalancing of our political economy and his frank recognition of the implications of unchecked consumerism for democracy and for freedom is most welcome. The Pontiff reminds those who will listen, irrespective of their status as Believers, that the governance and ecological crises the nation and world now confront are the offspring of a deeper erosion of a shared conception of society as commons. Citizens have voluntarily created that turn by a blinkered acceptance of marketization. One need not argue that democracy and capitalism cannot co-exist to contend that a profound change in the balance of these vital forces in favor of democracy now constitutes a moral and ethical imperative. Pope Francis is surely right on this count and this discerning Encyclical represents a clarion call to arms for just such action. One may hope it will stir long-lived soul searching among those too willing to see the market as magical panacea for all social challenges and for the preservation of liberty. Such introspection is essential if our nation and the world are not to lose democratic governance and true freedom to the Faustian bargain such ideological thinking represents.

(Originally published July 6, 2015)

Notes

¹ Pope Francis. 2015. *Laudato Si'*. Available at: <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/06/18/read-pope-francis-encyclical-laudato-si/>.

² Dan, Carrie. 2015. "Jeb Bush blasts 'Intellectual Arrogance' in Climate Change Debate," NBC News. Available at: <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/jeb-bush-blasts-intellectual-arrogance-climate-change-debate-n362586>.

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p.14.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, pp.143-144.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p.145.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p.157.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p.168.

57 The Shared Roots of Genocide and Systematic Persecution

July 11, 2015 marked 20 years since a Bosnian-Serbian armed force led by General Ratko Mladic trapped a group of townspeople in a beautiful high mountain valley in a United Nations protected zone near Srebrenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina and systematically murdered the village's unarmed Muslim men and boys. The death toll of this carefully planned three-day killing spree reached approximately 8,000. The international community continues to finance an effort to identify the remains of those slain, whose bodies—deliberately scattered to conceal the evidence—continue to be discovered in the nearby forest. To date, some 6,930 individuals have been identified from examination of 17,000 body parts. The Serbian government has apologized for the massacre, but has refused to label it genocide; that is, the nation's officials will not call it an intended attempt to exterminate completely and systematically the group targeted.

Nonetheless, recognizing this anniversary was looming and aware the United Nations Security Council has never declared the killings a genocide, the British government had sought to obtain a resolution from that body declaring the Srebrenica massacre such an event. Despite more than two years of negotiation with the Council's members, particularly Russia, and the obvious character and evil of the deed under consideration, that effort failed on the eve of the massacre's 20th anniversary. Russia vetoed the resolution on the basis of what its United Nations ambassador, Vitaly I. Churkin, called that effort's "confrontational" and "politically motivated" language. Meanwhile, Serbia characterized the draft resolution as one-sided, divisive and anti-Serb. China, Angola, Venezuela and Nigeria abstained from voting while 10 nations, including the United States, voted in favor. Only Russia voted no.¹

Despite this turn, this year as in all those since the killings, the worst in Europe since World War II, the Srebrenican bloodbath was commemorated on July 11 and the remains of more individuals were returned to their loved ones in plain draped coffins to be buried in the hillside near where the atrocity occurred. Moreover, the resolution's failure did nothing to undo the fact that two international tribunals had previously found that the murders constituted genocide. The International Court of Justice did so in its ruling

concerning a lawsuit brought against Serbia by Bosnia-Herzegovina in February 2007. The United Nations Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia also found two Bosnian Serb officers guilty of genocide in the Srebrenica killings. But those decisions cannot change the fact that Russia defeated a formal effort in the United Nations to label the event for what it was. The British initiative concerning the massacre saw the Serbs and their Russian ally work vigorously to change the subject and to blame those wishing to define the murders as genocide for conflict concerning the proposal.

Just months earlier, Pope Francis's decision in a special commemorative Mass on April 12, 2015, the 100th anniversary of the start of Turkey's systematic killings of Armenians and its associated mass deportations in the years between 1915 and the early 1920's, to depict those actions as genocide elicited a response from that nation's government that was similar to the push back from Serbia and Russia regarding the Srebrenica massacre.² This was so despite the fact that the Pope was simply repeating a judgment Pope John Paul II had earlier offered. The Turkish regime's action during and following World War I resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million individuals and the forced exile of many others. In response to Pope Francis' statement, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu suggested, as reported by *The Washington Post*, that the Roman Catholic leader was not only wrong, but also deeply hypocritical to raise this designation, which Turkey has long fought:

I am addressing the pope: those who escaped from the Catholic inquisition in Spain (Sephardic Jews) found peace in our just order in Istanbul and Izmir. We are ready to discuss historical issues, but we will not let people insult our nation through history.³

That is, the Prime Minister's reply to the Pope's declaration said nothing about the subject in question, but instead decried historic Catholic Church actions. Davutoğlu offered this "argument" concerning the Ottoman Empire's protection of blameless Jews during the Inquisition even as Turkey's current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan simultaneously was routinely giving speeches blaming the "Saturday People" for his nation's high interest rates and explaining modern history as the product of a grand conspiracy orchestrated by the Ust Akil (Jews).⁴ The irony of this response was profound, whatever the horrors of past Christian persecution.

Both the Srebrenica massacre and the Turkish slaughter and deportations of Armenians, whether or not one chooses to describe them as genocides, and however markedly different their scale, were motivated by a combination of fear and hatred of the different or “other” that is typical of such human cruelties across history. Those being asked to accept responsibility for the two crimes outlined here have offered the passive-voice mainstay “mistakes were made” as their explanation, without accepting full responsibility for the tragedies their governments directly or indirectly unleashed. Turkey explains its actions as an imperative of World War I—as if systematically killing 1.5 million of its own citizens was required by that conflict—and not the willful act of a government to eradicate a share of its population from its midst. Serbia’s leaders, while willing to apologize for the killings at Srebrenica, have also claimed that those seeking more are persecuting that state. Conveniently overlooked in this rhetorical mystification is the fact that Serbia orchestrated the war that resulted in the massacre and that soldiers working on its behalf perpetrated it. In both Turkey and Serbia, those seeking accountability and responsibility for murderous actions have been roundly rebuffed and attacked and told that the motives of those they dare impugn were actually more than understandable, if not beyond reproach. In addition, those expressing concerns have been admonished, whether popes or governments, “others did (and are doing) awful things, too.”

If the way that those seeking to defend otherwise indefensible actions to perpetuate discrimination against specific groups have used history as a justification to do so sounds familiar in these cases, it should. The United States is in the midst of what may prove a critical turn in how a share of its population, especially in its traditional Southern states, regards the Civil War, and its modern day symbolic evocation, display of the Confederate flag. Until a recent hate crime in Charleston, South Carolina, which killed 9 innocents in cold blood, versions of that flag flew on the capital grounds of South Carolina and Alabama and were featured in the design of the Georgia and Mississippi state banners. It was also on daily display in countless other locations across the South, despite the defeat and dissolution of the Confederacy in 1865, more than 150 years before. National debate following the shootings crystallized quickly around the Confederate banner because the alleged murderer, Dylann Roof, had wrapped himself in racist hate speech and that flag respectively, in photos and materials he had posted on the internet.

For context, it should be understood that the Confederate standard was revived during the Jim Crow era in the South by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s as a symbol of racial segregation, hatred and inequality and was first flown above the South Carolina statehouse in protest against the Civil Rights movement in 1956. This “new” use of the symbol signified continued popular Southern resistance to legal equality for African Americans. Nevertheless, to legitimate it, the flag was often justified as an honorable memorial to those who had fought and died on the Confederate side in the Civil War, not for slavery, but to defend their homes against alleged Northern invasion or for states rights.

The problem with these widely employed popular arguments is that NONE of the states that seceded, precipitating the Civil War, proposed them as their reason for doing so. South Carolina in 1860 was typical of the other Southern states in its rationale for dissolving the Union:

A geographical line has been drawn across the Union, and all the States north of that line have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery. He is to be entrusted with the administration of the common Government, because he has declared that that ‘Government cannot endure permanently half slave, half free,’ and that the public mind must rest in the belief that slavery is in the course of ultimate extinction. This sectional combination for the submersion of the Constitution, has been aided in some of the States by elevating to citizenship, persons who, by the supreme law of the land, are incapable of becoming citizens; and their votes have been used to inaugurate a new policy, hostile to the South, and destructive of its beliefs and safety.⁵

This is what the Confederate standard stood for and it surely explains why Roof and many other White supremacist racists would turn to it as a symbol for their tortured beliefs, and why the Klan and later Southern leaders of massive resistance, such as Alabama’s George Wallace and South Carolina’s Strom Thurmond, would embrace it as a symbolic frame for their stance.

At bottom, those perpetrating genocide always suggest thereafter they undertook such actions to exterminate a group that was both loathed and feared and no longer viewed as human. Those in the group so considered could be murdered with impunity as despicable “others.” Likewise, many

of those individuals in the South who for decades have embraced the Confederate flag have done so on the fictitious basis of its service as a representation of their heritage. In truth, however, the standard was created to represent a military defense of the practice of human bondage, “rediscovered” decades later as a symbol of hate and continued discrimination and thereafter maintained for nearly fifty years as a way to denote subtly continued resistance to formal equality for a persistently “othered” population—African Americans. While obviously all of these examples did not involve genocide per se, the Serbian and Turkish killings, and American cases of abuse, murder and systematic discrimination all arose from irrational hatred bred of anxiety about and intolerance of difference, and with the aim of establishing or maintaining “power over” an other. In each of these examples, too, entire groups have stood by cheering while a share of their own have been made the subject of ongoing social degradation and persecution.

Because we are human, we shall always have power mongering, xenophobia and small-minded hatred and ignorance with us. It seems reasonable to suggest that the ongoing debate concerning these three different situations holds the potential to bring home to the citizens and leaders of each nation involved how toxic and dangerous political appeals on the basis of difference, ignorance and intolerance are for freedom. Nonetheless, the human track record on this count should give pause to the sober minded devotee of democracy. I hope these events will create momentum not to continue developing ever more complex myths or rationalizations to continue discrimination and “othering” or to resist accountability for past heinous actions, but instead to establish and maintain cultures capable in the first place of resisting mobilization for tyranny and violence on the basis of human differences.

(Originally published July 20, 2015)

Notes

- ¹ Sengupta, Somini. 2015. “Russia Vetoes U.N. Resolution calling Srebrenica Massacre ‘Crime of Genocide,’” *The New York Times*, July 8. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/09/world/europe/russia-vetoes-un-resolution-calling-srebrenica-massacre-crime-of-genocide.html>;
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² Mullen, Jethro. 2015. "Pope Francis uses 'genocide' to refer to mass killings of Armenians by Turks," CNN website, April 13. Available at:

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/12/europe/pope-francis-turkey-armenia-genocide-reference/>.

³ Tharoor, Ishaan. 2015. "Turkey says the Pope is part of an 'evil front' because he used the word 'genocide,'" *The Washington Post*, April 15.

Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2015/04/15/turkey-says-the-pope-is-part-of-an-evil-front-because-he-used-the-word-genocide/>.

⁴ Luttwak, Edward, 2015. "Sins of the Three Pashas," *London Review of Books*, June 4, 37 (11), p.6. Available at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n11/edward-luttwak/sins-of-the-three-pashas>.

⁵ Cobb, Jelani. 2015. "Last Battles," *The New Yorker*, July 6 and 13. Available at: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/06/the-confederacys-final-retreat>.

58 A Portrait of a Cruel Imaginary and a Sketch of an Alternative

Some days it is difficult to believe that what one reads in this early stage of the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign is really occurring. Republican Party candidate Donald Trump, for example, recently garnered a great deal of media attention by questioning whether U.S. Senator John McCain (R., Arizona) is a war hero and has been a legislative advocate for his fellow veterans. As is so often the case with such incidents in our nation's recent politics, there was nothing to Trump's allegations, which were predicated, as he noted, on the view that he "likes his heroes" never to have been captured by the enemy. Nonetheless, the candidate, who has never served in the military, offended many people and gained a great deal of press coverage by resorting to the outrageous. Indeed, one might explain his behavior as cynical grandstanding. But I am not convinced that is all there is to this matter, nor does such explain why so many GOP voters would accept his baseless claims, even as many of the same group embraced his earlier fatuous assertions concerning the character and aims of Latin American immigrants to the United States. No, this rhetoric is not merely sensational for publicity sake, nor simply the words of a narcissist who plainly loves to hear himself speak.

Trump appears to be playing both to the deep-seated economic anxiety of a significant segment of voters and to their willingness to assign negative characteristics to those he targets as a consequence of their state of fearfulness. In polls, at least, these individuals cheer this rhetoric because they now believe that vulnerable people—a young McCain captured when his plane was shot down over Vietnam and would-be immigrants alike—are alone responsible for their desperate conditions, which result from individual failings.

Trump's relative success in polls with likely Republican voters in early primary states has demonstrated that to be vulnerable today is potentially to be subjected to a political rhetoric of derision rooted in a view of society as comprised of wholly autonomous individuals without interest or ties to anyone or anything other than themselves. Those who "succeed," especially materially, are considered by adherents of this perspective as "superior" to those who do not. They are therefore and thereby entitled to heap disdain on

those manifestly “not their equals.” Anyone who has not realized prosperity or demonstrated willingness to measure worthiness based on claims to rugged individual “success” can be dismissed as “less than.” Thus it is in this *Alice in Wonderland* world that war heroes can be declared weaklings and would-be immigrants can be labeled contemptible. Likewise, virtually all people receiving public assistance of virtually any sort may be dubbed “takers” and so on. This rhetoric is directly linked to the GOP and our nation’s strong embrace of neoliberal tenets and its accompanying vision of society as market-ruled, with only a small role for democratic choice. In this view, government is conceived not as playing a potentially unifying role amidst the press of dogged competition or as protecting freedom and equality, but as preventing individual pursuit of self-interest and material aggrandizement.

If this orientation is evidenced in Trump’s current salience, it is also true in much other policy that his Party has embraced in recent years, including relentless opposition to efforts to raise the minimum wage for Americans (paradoxically, overall wages have been stalled for many of the GOP’s supporters in real terms for decades) and equally vociferous attacks on governance, on collective bargaining and on social programs, including Medicaid, food and unemployment assistance, health insurance support and many others. State legislative members of this same party have sought in recent months to ensure that poor families using food stamps may not use them to purchase organic foods or diapers or steak or seafood. These steps have been justified not on the basis of evidence of widespread abuse or even that such goods are nutritionally inadequate or constitute luxuries, but on the basis of an a priori belief that to be poor (read “weak”) and receiving aid is to be untrustworthy. That is, from this perspective, poor and vulnerable people may be expected to bilk taxpayers and should be treated with suspicion regardless of whether there is any empirical proof to support such a stance. The neoliberal imaginary, with its ideological worship of the market, disdain for democratic politics and celebration of individualism, leads its adherents relentlessly to such judgments.

Lest one believe this orientation is somehow unique to the United States and not to the ideology that underpins it, one need look no further than Great Britain, whose Conservative government recently announced it would propose legislation to redefine the category of support for those deemed by physicians as “medically incapable of work” (people with Parkinson’s disease or multiple sclerosis, for example) and provide only such aid for those individuals as would be offered to those unemployed and seeking jobs

(despite medical diagnoses that such individuals cannot work). In short, the Conservative Party's leaders in the United Kingdom appear willing to embrace individualism so fully, and so abhor the idea of a public safety net that they are ready to redefine chronic illness and disability on the false certainty that failure to do so will rob aid recipients of their motivation to participate in the market (which, again, medical specialists have declared such individuals unable to do).

This imaginary leads its adherents to flights of heartlessness not otherwise seen in recent times. This frame appears not to impose any limits in principle on individualism and its accompanying antipathy to social claims arising in community. This seems to be so because such needs are not market driven and cannot be justified on a utilitarian calculus alone. Community and its instrument (governance and democratic politics) must therefore be attacked in favor of the assumed superiority of the market. Based on the current GOP presidential candidates in the U.S. and the announced policy direction of the Conservative government in Britain, we may reasonably expect a doubling down on such an orientation in coming years from each party. In policy terms, one may anticipate that advocates will justify additional increases in income and social inequality, already vast and growing, as necessary to provide needed capital to "job creators" who will also continue to receive the benefit of huge public tax expenditures on the same rationale. We may also expect continuing attacks on social safety net programs, including nutrition assistance and unemployment aid, on the argument that these reward tricksters and indolence and prevent those they assist from making their own choices.

There is an alternative to this bleakly brutish anti-social imaginary and Pope Francis highlighted its key elements in his recent encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. In that document the Catholic leader observed,

As the United States bishops have said, greater attention must be given to 'the needs of the poor, the weak and the vulnerable, in a debate often dominated by more powerful interests.' We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference.¹

In this short space the Pope suggested three vital points that the neoliberal imaginary clouds or fails to acknowledge:

- Human beings do not exist autonomously in relationship to a market, but as members of families and complex societies with ties not only to their own relatives and neighbors and fellow citizens, but also increasingly to all other human beings on the planet.
- Poverty, disability, illness, hunger and inequality will never be alleviated by declaring people experiencing such conditions “weak” or personally lacking, perhaps especially when unscrupulous leaders can win votes and political power by scapegoating and “othering” these groups in the name of a supposed omnipotent and omniscient market.
- No amount of worship of capitalism and its associated powerful economic interests will allow that system, whatever its virtues, to substitute for democratic politics or ensure the freedom of those in the society in which it is allowed to function. A free and democratic society requires that its citizens oversee the workings of the marketplace through their chosen governments and not the other way around.

As a society, we appear increasingly to have entered an untethered politics of fear and cruelty targeting perceived personal weakness and vulnerability. Continued acceptance of a social imaginary predicated on individualism and the market can only lead to governance dysfunction, growing inequality and social injustice. All of these conditions are likely to continue to corrode the possibility of genuine individual freedom as a cardinal social attribute in the long run, and it is on such a reality that democratic self-governance ultimately rests.

(Originally published August 2, 2015)

Notes

¹ Pope Francis. 2015. *Laudato Si'*. Available at: <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/06/18/read-popefrancis-encyclical-laudato-si/>, pp.38-39.

59 Rediscovering the Democratic and Economic Possibility Inherent in Imagination

In a recent article, Department of Political Science Professor Laura Zanotti and I argue that several theorists recently have begun suggesting that international politics is so deeply complex that it is an exercise in misguided hubris for analysts, regime officials and funders to imagine they can know what precisely will occur or unfold when they undertake a development or peacebuilding action.¹ Following this line of thinking, we argue that in lieu of epistemological assumptions that presume linear causal sequences and that support the notion that actors initiating specific steps can know in advance their implications, would-be peacebuilders and international developers alike should develop ways of knowing that embrace the ambiguities and describe the micro-political contexts in which most meaningful social action occurs. That is, we contend that international agents who would intervene to influence human behavior and actions should adopt nonsubstantialist perspectives that recognize the inevitability of uncertainties and the persistent presence of plural interests and viewpoints. This conceptualization places a premium on the reflexivity and creativity of those seeking to catalyze potential change. In this sense, this theorization demands aesthetic sensibility and possibility, and does not pretend that ordained paths are likely when initiatives are undertaken.

Zanotti and I investigated how two international arts organizations, Bond Street Theatre and American Voices, approached their roles in peacebuilding initiatives as purveyors of theatre and music respectively. We found that each nongovernmental institution had indeed adopted epistemic frames quite consistent with those now being offered by international politics theorists. That, we thought, was surely good news. But, however appropriate and robust their preferred orientations to knowing, that fact constituted only half of the story. These organizations' leaders also had to respond to government funders who demanded that each adopt an inapt and mythical conception of peacebuilding and development interventions. The entities supporting their efforts presumed these NGO leaders could know in advance

the implications of their actions and predict precisely when and how social norms, values and behaviors would be transformed along a linear timetable.

This perspective, arising from a neoliberal imaginary, not only requires such thinking, but insists that it ultimately be oriented to only one valence or value—efficiency—irrespective of other beliefs or concerns that may be in play. This view stems from neoliberalism’s idealized vision of the market as premier social arbiter and guarantor. In short, the dominant worldview among state agents acting in global politics today not only is inconsistent empirically with the dynamics of that firmament, but it also goes much further to wish away that reality. Indeed, this perspective demands that those working on its behalf (major Western governments especially) ascribe to its mythology regarding causation and agency, and assume that the unknowable and indeterminate are actually readily deduced, and that causal chains can be both charted and controlled.

If this is an accurate description of the ideological conceit of the neoliberal impulse, it seems likely that this orientation is present in other domains as well, since this epistemic frame has dominated Western (and especially United States) politics for four decades. Indeed, this stance can be found at the heart of one of the most perplexing policy problems confronting the U.S. and other major democratic nations today: the slowdown in growth in these countries’ economies in the last 35 years as compared to the early post-World War II decades.

Economists have suggested all sorts of reasons for this turn, but most finally come to rest on the hard fact that innovation, and thus productivity, have flagged in this period (even in the United States, and despite the upward blip occasioned by the growth of the technology industry in the Silicon Valley in the 1990s). The difficult question then becomes, why has productivity growth slowed across the Western nations?

In a fascinating article in the August 13, 2015, issue of the *New York Review of Books*, Edmund Phelps, a Nobel Prize winning professor of economics at Columbia University, addressed just this concern. In his essay, Phelps contended that American culture (and those of other Western nations) has shifted from one that encouraged what he calls “human flourishing” to one that continues to generate massive injustice, evidences a diminishing capacity to be inclusive and exhibits ongoing economic sluggishness. Here is how he describes his notion of flourishing:

Historically, as my book, *Mass Flourishing*, argues, prospering and flourishing became prevalent in the nineteenth century when, in Europe and America, economies emerged with the dynamism to generate their own innovation. Responding to the challenges and opportunities of an ever-evolving economy, the more entrepreneurial participants were immersed in the experience of solving the new problems and overcoming the new hurdles posed in the process of innovation: these people were “prospering.” Sparked by the new spirit of dynamism, the more innovative participants were constantly trying to think of new ways to produce things or new things to produce: these people were “flourishing.”²

Put differently, but in keeping with Phelps’ arguments, these were nations whose cultures encouraged creativity and imagination and found ways to share the fruits of the application of those faculties with a diverse array of groups within their bounds. Today’s Western countries and cultures, however, in practice have little use for creativity or imagination. In lieu of seeking to encourage the same among all and to share their fruits with all, these nations instead seek to distribute wealth upward and to existing interests and routinely embrace public philosophies that suggest that only ideas and constructs currently relevant to the “market” are to be venerated. These twin forces—the suppression of innovation by many existing elites and interests, and the redefinition of education as the immediately vocationally useful and its implications for cultural possibility—go far in explaining the productivity (and therefore economic growth and distributive justice) crises of the West.

Phelps does not so state in his essay, but it is clear that both of these claims arise from and are sustained by the dominant neoliberal public philosophy or imaginary, which continues to marketize all U.S. and Western social institutions. In the name of this ideology, education at all levels has been redefined increasingly as a capacity to pass tests and a mastery of technical subjects perceived as likely to allow individuals to secure a job in the prevailing economy. In effect, the United States and other Western nations have decided to raise generations of individuals with little understanding of human history and still less awareness of literature or even of their own politics, information that could equip them with a deep knowledge of human frailties, capacities and values. The arts, meanwhile, have also been declared

“superfluous” in countless school systems, despite their power to unleash imaginative possibilities.

In compliance with the stilted and stunted epistemological view that is neoliberalism, Western nations, led by the United States and Great Britain, have elected not to provide generations of their citizens with the critical wherewithal to imagine and innovate. Instead, these countries have sought to prepare their youth to continue to produce the equivalent of buggy whips as a new automotive age dawns. Phelps concludes that this situation must change if Western nations are once again to become flourishing cultures, and vibrant economies: “We will all have to turn from the classical fixation on wealth accumulation and efficiency to a modern economics that places imagination and creativity at the center of economic life.”³

While Phelps’ conclusions concerning shriveled social consequences for our nation’s culture and economy make enormous sense, I want to emphasize several other implications of neoliberalism:

- Broad swathes of populations taught to limit their horizons, both because individual mobility appears unlikely in societies that persistently tell their poor, vulnerable, minority and middle class citizens that they are “unworthy” and “lacking,” even as those societies redistribute wealth upward so as to ensure “market viability.” This perspective results in a social schema that creates persisting, pervasive and deepening economic and social inequality
- A nominally democratic citizenry increasingly unable to access educational opportunities to develop the reasoning and imaginative capacities necessary to play its rightful deliberative role. This self-imposed orientation to an instrumental and commodified view of education persists despite the obvious reality that higher levels of economic vitality and cultural flourishing occurred historically without the need for such a wholesale supplicatory stance to the perceived current vocational demands of a mythologized “market”
- A substantial share of the population in persistent fear of losing its place in the economy, which makes it susceptible to charismatic, but antidemocratic leaders who degrade freedom and self-governance, directly and indirectly
- The creation of elites who believe themselves entitled to exalted social status and who press regime leaders relentlessly by means of their economic resources to maintain and deepen their privileged standing.

Phelps has done a service to all who care about the trajectory of American and Western society, and his academic discipline, by making plain the reality that markets are not something “out there” to be worshipped as a part of an ideology, but are instead very much the products of their cultures. Whatever their virtues, they will only be as strong as the ways of knowing and living of the people who create, nourish and sustain them. They are not important for themselves, but only for how they result from and can contribute to a population’s welfare and way of life, including its collective capacity for self-governance. As Laura Zanotti and I have argued in our analysis of international politics theory and peacebuilding and development, widespread adoption of this frame has imposed assumptions and claims unrelated to empirical reality while simultaneously placing difficult constraints on already taxed program implementers, making it exceedingly challenging for them to engage in the sorts of imaginative and creative experimentation their context demands.

More broadly, neoliberalism has not only artificially redefined international and all other forms of politics in its image, but it has also recast education in ways that virtually ensure a citizenry less well prepared to exercise the creativity, probity and inventiveness that democratic governance and economic growth demand. The regnant Western neoliberal frame is not now conducing to human flourishing in any broad-gauged way, and we must soon collectively realize that fact. As Phelps’ essay suggests, the costs of not doing so are likely to be immeasurably high.

(Originally published August 16, 2015)

Notes

¹ Stephenson, Max Jr. and Laura Zanotti. 2015. “Exploring the Nexus of Aesthetics, Agency and Peacebuilding,” Paper prepared for delivery at the International Studies Association 56th annual convention, New Orleans, La., February 18-21, 2015.

² Phelps, Edmund. 2015 “What is Wrong with the West’s Economies?” *The New York Review of Books*, August 13, p. 54.

³ Phelps, “What is Wrong with the West’s Economies?” p. 56.

60 ‘Ascription by Assumption’ and Democratic Politics

I recently read novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch’s acclaimed first novel, *Under the Net*, published in 1954. While I had read other of her works, I had never before completed this much-feted book. Murdoch, who died in 1999 at 80, was a gifted writer whose works were, perhaps not unexpectedly, steeped in philosophic themes and explorations. Her initial offering set the template for what would become the rule in her subsequent novels.

In *Under the Net*, the reader meets a feckless artist/narrator, Jake Donaghue, and learns how he came to tell the story offered in the book as a result of a number of specific relationships and events he experiences in London. The novel chronicles its narrator’s adventures as he careens about Britain’s capital city on what amounts to a search for truth. As Kiernan Ryan, professor of English Literature of the University of London pointed up in the introduction to my edition of the book, Donaghue grapples with at least two fundamental issues as he seeks to make sense of his feelings concerning a broken relationship particularly. First, he must learn about himself, or learn to practice reflexivity, a capacity and habit he has never acquired. Second, Donaghue must wrestle with allowing others to be themselves and not projecting onto each his desired view of them. As Ryan observed in his essay,

This is the fundamental wisdom that suffuses Iris Murdoch’s fiction from *Under the Net* onward. True virtue, true goodness, true love flow from the respect for the strangeness of the mystery of other people and the world that surrounds us. They flow from the refusal to inflict our own designs on them, to deny their innate elusiveness, their impenetrable quiddity. When Jake reaches this realization, he is ready to write, ... instead of projecting his illusions upon [the world].¹

There is not space here to provide an account of all of Donaghue’s experiences as he repeatedly attributed views and characteristics to those he met, and just as often found himself in difficult straits as a result. I have come to label this very human propensity “ascription by assumption.” That is, as we go about our daily lives and seek to make sense of them, we are

drawn to sort what we encounter into categories and meanings with which we are comfortable and to which, for whatever complex set of reasons, we are drawn. This can and often does lead individuals to assign characteristics and views to others that they have adopted or desire, but which their targets may never have articulated or intended. Murdoch's genius was to highlight this common human foible, to point up how difficult a philosophic problem it represents, and also to illustrate how often it results in misunderstanding, injustice and worse. Despite all this, and irrespective of its ubiquity, humans fall prey to ascription by assumption every day. The question is not whether one will find this propensity alluring, but how to prevent it from clouding one's vision and experience of reality. That is, as Murdoch's protagonist's experience made clear, one may overcome this inclination, but it is never easy. To do so requires self-discipline and awareness and a habit of mind willing to suspend judgment rather than jump to conclusions about "others" based on projections of one's desires, beliefs or fears.

Murdoch's powerful novel set me considering the implications of its vision of truth, reality and humanity for democratic politics, and my first thought was to conclude that she was surely right about the pervasiveness of the phenomenon of ascription by assumption. Ideologues of all stripes take this stance as a matter of course and see their views as reality and demand that their experiences accord with their beliefs rather than vice versa. Likewise, such individuals are willing to "other" all and sundry to maintain a desired purity of their sensemaking convictions. It is far easier so to behave than to grapple with the complexities that characterize the concerns they seek to address. So it was that President George W. Bush and other key leaders in his administration could assume that the United States could "democratize" other cultures by force of arms and conviction, and why they were long blind to the implications of what was in fact occurring as a result of their assumptions. So it was, too, that Mao Zedong could persecute millions in the name of a set of abstract beliefs during China's so-called "Cultural Revolution."

These are dramatic, ugly and costly examples, but the phenomenon is so common that we often fail to notice it at play. We ascribe by assumption in our family and work relationships every day or, at least, we are subject to just such possibilities daily. Our politics, too, is chock full of such claims aimed at simplifying complexities to mobilize groups to the polls. It is also striking how often this phenomenon pervades our policy conversation. On August 7, for example, in an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, Gerard

Alexander, a University of Virginia Associate Professor of Politics, criticized television talk show host Jon Stewart as he was retiring for too often being unsparing of conservative guests and unduly smug about his own views on his show. In a particularly ironic and strong example of Murdoch's warning against ascription by assumption, Alexander faulted Stewart for not using his bully pulpit to pull the ideological wool from progressives' eyes, and then went on to illustrate his argument by referring to an interview the talk show host undertook with John Yoo in 2010.

Yoo, a law professor at the University of California, Berkeley, served in the Department of Justice during the Bush administration and was tasked with providing a justification for torture of prisoners during the Iraq and Afghan wars that the White House had chosen to undertake. This much is well known. But, according to Alexander, Stewart was caught flat-footed by the soft-spoken Yoo, who "explained that he had been asked to determine what legally constituted torture so the government could stay safely on this side of the line."² In fact, torture was illegal at the time under both United States and international law to which the U.S. was a signatory, and these were being ignored by an administration that had decided to engage in such practices anyway.

The issue for Stewart in the interview was not an academic discussion of interrogation techniques and torture, but why the White House pressed this issue in the first place. In short, Alexander criticized Stewart on the basis of assumptions about what was at stake the host did not appear to share. The professor attributed assumptions to his target as he pressed his own argument. In this case, the paradox of contending that others have practiced such an orientation while unleashing it oneself, was especially obvious.

While ascription by assumption is extremely common and daily has important consequences at individual, family and state scales, it seems true, too, that the mediatization of society makes it easier for the phenomenon to have broad implications for democratic politics. This is so to the extent that those campaigning for office assign views by assumption to their counterparts and relevant electorates are unable to discern that such is occurring and account for it in their voting behavior. Misinformation could cause this result, as could ideology, as could willful ignorance, practiced on whatever grounds. Media make it easier both to position such claims and to trumpet them, and to do so knowingly.

The only way to equip a democratic citizenry to take the pragmatic and open philosophic stance Murdoch advocated in her writing is to provide

people with the critical reasoning capabilities and self-awareness necessary to practice it. The way to do that is to begin in elementary school and continue to develop students' self-awareness and critical capacities through high school and beyond. Unfortunately, the U.S. education system is today far from pursuing this aspiration, leaving substantial shares of the electorate vulnerable to ascription by assumption, whether as they might personally practice it or as it might intentionally be employed in mobilization politics to persuade them. To the extent that both forms of the phenomenon proceed unchecked in our culture, this trend cannot be counted a healthy one for a democratic polity.

(Originally published August 31, 2015)

Notes

¹ Murdoch, Iris. 1954, 2002. *Under the Net*. London: Vintage, p. xiii.

² Alexander, Gerard. 2015. "Jon Stewart, Patron Saint of Liberal Smugness," *The New York Times*, August 7. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/opinion/sunday/jon-stewart-patron-saint-of-liberal-smugness.html>.

61 On Perfidy, Penury and the Danger of Depravity

Perfidy is one of those interesting words that you do not see used often, but which has always intrigued me, as its sound to the ear matches its meaning. It means deceitfulness or untrustworthiness. Penury is another such word, and it describes a condition of deep impoverishment and serves as a good descriptor of a profoundly enervated public dialogue. Recently, I have seen depravity, a strong word connoting moral corruption, appearing in print more frequently. On reflection, I am struck that together these words go far in capturing several central threads of our current politics. They represent clarion calls for new thinking and for a corrective course in our collective efforts to govern ourselves.

In short, I wish here to raise a caution flag and to highlight some long-term disturbing trends in our culture and politics that I believe fall within the reach of the meanings of these words. The first notable development has been with us for decades and is now daily reinforced by a market logic driven by a desire for profitability on the part of firms supporting it. This has to do with the role of the media in our society and our individual and collective capacity to expose ourselves only to the views, news and ideas with which we are predisposed to agree. With the proliferation and canalization of radio, television, Web and print media outlets, progressives may, for example, watch CNBC and read *The Nation* while conservatives can have their perspectives reinforced daily by Fox News, a number of radio entertainment shows and *The National Review*. Those driving these media daily proselytize on the web, via the airwaves and in print, not only sharing points-of-view, but more importantly, attracting viewers, readers or listeners to boost profits. Shrillness, anger and outrage sell. Sustained efforts to bridge differences among competing perspectives do not provide such salient dramatic tension, nor do they persuade voters not to change the channel or find another website.

The result is a mediated politics of breathless immediacy, frequently without depth or perspective, whose principal driving criterion increasingly is what will ensure a profitable rate of return for the parent corporation. Thus, Rush Limbaugh daily rails against imagined horrors of all sorts that are always the product of the current “evil” President and his political party

and that play to the fears, anxieties and prejudices of his listeners. This orientation has yielded a handsome income for Limbaugh and strong profits for the firms sponsoring him. For similar reasons, CNN and other media outlets have provided Donald Trump large chunks of falsely intense free coverage (Has he arrived at the hall yet? What will he say next? How will his latest target react to his jeering? Tune in at 6!) because his outrageous behavior draws viewers, and those eyeballs ensure ads and profits. We increasingly have a “news” media that too often panders (thankfully not always) to consumer preferences and prejudices and does so with a nod and a wink to maximize its profitability. And far more often than not, the vision offered listeners and viewers is one of false alarm, unmerited anger and imagined decline, for which there is no logical endpoint. These claims are thereafter always addressed by a veritable army of pundits, commentators and politicians with simple, and just as often simple-minded, absolutist explanations—blame an “other,” of whatever sort, and denigrate self-governance and equality as the signal “problems” our society now confronts.

In addition, our Supreme Court has declared that all who can afford to do so may essentially spend whatever they wish to further political campaigns and advocacy of their particular interests. As a result, as a nation we find ourselves, for example, awash in multi-million dollar corporate-sponsored efforts to persuade citizens that climate change is not occurring because the business models and immense profitability of the firms backing them depend strongly on continued use of fossil fuels. These sorts of expenditures and initiatives have been accompanied by orchestrated efforts by billionaire libertarians designed to convince Americans to despise their governments and to adopt a negative view of the very notion of the commons as a necessary condition of self-governance. These wealthy individuals have created a wide array of “think tanks” and institutes, and they have supported candidates at all levels of government to press and appear to legitimate their views, which ultimately, they see as essential to protect their unfettered business interests.

Amidst these well-documented trends, a majority of lawmakers in Congress and state legislatures have worked for decades to privilege the wealthiest in society on the view that such individuals are the engines of economic growth. Interestingly, empirically, that policy choice has repeatedly failed, but it has nonetheless contributed strongly to the most unequal distribution of economic resources in the United States since the Gilded Age. A similar naïve adulation of the market has resulted for more

than 40 years in claims that the country's citizens must remake all social institutions in the market's image, including governments and civil society entities. That has wrought Rube Goldberg policy implementation machinery, which is devilishly difficult to make work efficiently, effectively and equitably. In any case, today's complex governance structures are opaque to the average citizen, who often has no idea of how public services are delivered or why they are so offered. That incapacity to fathom the complexities of what is happening in government is now yielding persistent frustration among voters who are increasingly willing to listen to demagogues and self-interested purveyors of the equivalent of snake oil concerning supposed alternatives to self-governance. Paradoxically, all of this has resulted from deliberate choices and claims by interested advocates and political leaders that there can be an "easy" alternative to democratic choice making.

Speaking of our lawmakers, they are less and less representative of average Americans and more and more the beneficiaries of primary elections that attract only the most extreme voters; that is, those whose beliefs and claims are typically far less moderate than those of the larger electorate. Once in office, congresspersons have worked assiduously, and for the most part successfully in recent decades, to gerrymander their districts to maximize their possibilities for reelection. The result too often is a politics of meanness and smallness, with elected officials more consumed by efforts to signal true believers and donors and to score points against the hated "others" who disagree—or "losers," in Donald Trump's phrase—than in seeking to serve the common good or public interest. What matters today in politics is zinging your perceived opponents in facile ways and gaining media attention as you do to galvanize your core supporters.

Coupled with this long-term trend of forgetting how to disagree civilly is a propensity most obvious in the GOP to adopt extreme and fantastical stands that play to citizen prejudices and fears and bear little relationship to the needs of the polity writ large or the demands of self-governance. Thus, we have nominal presidential candidates today calling for expelling all immigrants to the United States, for building walls along the nation's borders for no clear purpose and demanding unending conflicts without a serious explanation of their necessity, except claims that "we" will get the "bad guys" thereby. We are witnessing similarly vacuous and not so subtle disparagements of entire swathes of our population, including women, Latinos and African Americans, all in the name of playing to the perceived anxieties and ignorance of disaffected, confused and fearful voters.

Put differently, we now are a polity whose political leaders more and more do not believe themselves beholden to those “other” voters who are not members of their electoral coalition, and in which many of these individuals openly declare that their intention is to undermine the very possibility of governance, despite their oaths of office to the contrary. Thousands daily cheer their stance. Led with depressing frequency by a vision of declension and emptied of deep concern for the polity as polity rather than as mobilizable factions, our politics has too often become a setting for the sterile and often puerile pursuit of power for its own sake. Our lawmakers commonly title new bills by names meant to disguise their true intent and just as often offer pseudo explanations designed to justify stands adopted for other reasons. That is, our politics is now very often perfidious. It is so because it can be, and because those pressing the interests so often driving it aim only to advocate their preferences to lawmakers too often guided by little more than simplistic ideology and a desire for power. These trends raise the specter of a nation characterized by a politics of moral corruption. We currently are witnessing tens of thousands of would-be voters supporting supposed leaders who daily malign major shares of the nation’s population as “less than” and who prey—often viciously—on the prejudice and lack of understanding of those they are charged with serving. History teaches that in this direction lies only depravity.

None of these trends is unchangeable, but all are deeply entrenched and all serve specific economic, political or social interests or concerns. The large question now confronting our people and regime is whether we will continue to countenance these directions or will begin to take steps to rein in the perfidy, impoverished rhetoric and growing depravity they represent, and find ways to discern common cause and act together to support human dignity and freedom.

(Originally published September 28, 2015)

62 Trumpism: The Politics of Fear and Fecklessness

And so, it has come to this: A man who is routinely and accurately described as a narcissist, misogynist and nativist, and who reflects an earlier “Know Nothing” discriminatory social moment in American politics, now unexpectedly leads in public opinion polls for the Republican Party presidential nomination. Real estate businessman Donald Trump has no experience in government and politics and has repeatedly shown that he has virtually no grasp of policy issues at any level. Indeed, most of his ugly rhetoric involves self-puffery and vanity of the “I am smarter, richer and more handsome” than those “other guys (and one woman)” stripe—or cruel diminutions of women, minorities and immigrants. As a person who has never served in the military and who grew up with wealth, he has also argued that Senator John McCain (R-Arizona), who endured horrible torture in service to his nation, is not “really” a war hero, and that all who are poor or struggling are simply “stupid” and should be more like him. This last implies that he actually earned his original wealth and social standing, which ironically, he did not.

I have read countless accounts concerning Trump in the last several weeks and how it could be that so vile and empty an individual could be doing so well with so many GOP voters at this early stage of our nation’s presidential campaign. What follows are several observations concerning the realities and ironies of the political phenomenon this turn represents.

- All of the reporters and analysts who have talked with Trump’s supporters have found that he is attracting members of far right nationalist groups who dread the coming demographic shift in the United States that will find whites a minority of the population. These individuals fear social heterogeneity and wish to reinstitute formal separation of the races and a roll back of civil rights laws and rights for minority group members. Many adherents of this group are racists.
- A still larger share of those presently supporting Trump in opinion polls fall into the demographic category of people who have suffered most from globalization and neo-liberal politics and whose life chances and real wages have fallen or stagnated in real terms in recent decades.

Most of these are high school educated men and many are deeply anxious and fearful about their economic situations, a condition that has left many of them angry and looking for someone to blame and, just as importantly, someone who will tell them that simple and binary actions (e.g., loathe “those” individuals and blame them for your woes and vote for me) can “fix” their situations. These individuals seek, or more accurately perhaps, demand the balm of a world made simple. Trump routinely provides the bromide of scapegoating and vague, sweeping and empty claims that soothes their angst.

- Trump’s rhetoric is angry, cruel and superficial. For example, a common trope in his stump speeches that the Mexicans are “killing us” is a meaningless assertion. Nonetheless, this contention gives his followers a target and a population to blame for their personal situations and anxiousness. In short, Trump’s speeches are classic examples of demagoguery. They offer a vision of the world unrelated to reality, but which offers absolute and apparently straightforward answers to deeply complex challenges. Rather than ask his followers to cope with the knotty vagaries of what is actually occurring and together seek strategies to address those, Trump offers a fantasy vision of “us and them” and equally fantastical assertions about what he alone could achieve with just the application of his “supreme” intellect and perceptual ability. Only Trump, he often claims, could build the effective 2,000-mile wall “we need” along the U.S. border with Mexico and somehow convince that nation’s leaders to pay for the structure. How he would do this is, of course, never articulated. Nor, does Trump ever deign to explain why the expansion of the current wall, itself a deeply controversial artifact of “othering,” is necessary or appropriate. All that is required in this vision is that Trump says it is so and he alone mysteriously will make his offered solution happen.
- Unlike earlier moments in American history when demagogues have emerged, the internet has provided Trump multiple unmediated opportunities to spread his diatribes of hate. While some members of his Party’s establishment and many media commentators have labeled him for what he is, voters supporting him can easily ignore those voices in favor of others contending that only Trump is “telling it like it is” and everyone else is simply weak. No matter that this rhetoric bears no relationship to reality. Those within the bubble of true believers can always point to messaging in outlets they follow that supports their

point-of-view. Moreover, many television and radio firms, especially the Fox Network, are profiting handsomely by providing Trump ongoing opportunities to reach his base and by encouraging the anxiety and anger that animates those followers. Their collective angst has yielded dedicated viewers and listeners that result in advertising dollars and profits. To say this is irresponsible is simply to state the obvious, but it is surely not illegal to profit from manipulating ignorance and fear.

- Trump's broad claims have pressed many of the other candidates also pursuing his party's presidential nomination to offer equally nonsensical and sometimes chilling statements in an effort to keep pace. Thus, we have seen Scott Walker calling for a wall along America's nearly 4,000-mile boundary (excluding that with Alaska) with Canada, despite the fact that there is no evidence whatsoever of any crisis along that border (laying aside the question of whether a wall would be an appropriate response if such a situation did exist). And Chris Christie has suggested, chillingly in light of the Nazi precedent, that this nation track all immigrants with assigned numbers, as if each was equivalent to a FedEx or Postal Service package. It would be easy to expand these examples, but they point to a political party in deep existential crisis, and to a share of the nation's citizenry too often willing to believe the nonsensical and hateful rhetoric of those seeking power in that party.

Interestingly, none of this present demagogic moment can be said to be unprecedented. Like many dangerous opportunists before him, Donald Trump has sensed the anxiety and anger of a share of the nation's population and worked to use it to gain power. That is what demagogues do. Still, it must also be said that the GOP has deliberately created these conditions in the policies it has pursued for more than fifty years. The conservative wing of the Republican Party long ago abandoned a responsibility to govern for attacks on self-governance itself. Likewise, GOP leaders have for just as long sided, sometimes subtly, and often not, with efforts that lament the growing heterogeneity of the country. These have included recent calls for rollbacks in civil and human rights for people who are not white, including steps to limit access to the franchise for those targeted populations in 19 states.

In many respects, as many individuals have observed, the Republican Party now confronts in Trump the consequences of its own policies and stands adopted since 1964, when its standard bearer Barry Goldwater opposed the civil right legislation of that year. That stance was followed by Richard

Nixon's "Southern Strategy" and by Ronald Reagan's attack on the welfare state as unfairly assisting too many supposedly nefarious minorities. That long-term orientation has convinced those now supporting Trump that simple steps will remove the supposed cancer of foreign invasion and minority lassitude from the country and restore his followers to a less anxious firmament. A very human desire for security is now fueling support for bigotry and hatred. And, sadly, any fair-minded analyst must note that the GOP has nurtured this result for decades.

Finally, it should be said that our current scenario has ever been the bane of democratic politics. In that sense, this surge of demagoguery is hardly new. While many in the media have focused on Trump as an individual, one needs also to ask how it is that even a minority of the Republican Party or citizenry could come to back so transparently vacuous a figure. Put differently, we are now confronting a politics in which restive and ill-informed citizens can be manipulated by simple, simple-minded and hate-filled shibboleths. Demagogues have always seized such opportunities, and too often they have resulted in the collapse of self-governance. The larger question this man's candidacy represents is how our citizens, and not alone our elected leaders, allowed this disquieting scenario to emerge. There are lessons in this episode aplenty, and many of those ultimately suggest that thousands of voters look in the mirror and question the implications of many of their most fervent beliefs, for their own freedom as well as the future of their regime.

(Originally published September 13, 2015)

63 On Imagination, Trust and Democratic Governance

The Institute for Policy and Governance's Community Voices (CV) graduate student group recently co-hosted with the Moss Arts Center a screening of the documentary, *Born to Fly*, profiling the life and work of choreographer Elizabeth Streb.¹ Following the film, the MacArthur award-winning artist and her company joined the audience for questions and answers led by CV students. Streb has long sought to work with her dancers to take risks related to gravity in ways that allow the performers to address their fears associated with that force. Her work combines dance, circus and gymnastics in daring ways that invite anxiety and that seek to demonstrate that such emotions and the challenges they represent can be overcome. The Community Voices students, concerned as they are with social change processes and leadership, found these themes resonated broadly as a metaphor in a U.S. culture in which many are now filled with anxiety and fear for the future.

Many Americans dread the growing racial and ethnic heterogeneity of the nation's population, for example, while others are concerned about their economic standing amidst continuing globalization and what appears to be unfathomable political complexity. What these individuals do know is that their wages are stagnant or declining in real terms and that their employment, benefits and sense of security seem more parlous with each passing day. Millions of people live paycheck-to-paycheck and worry that small changes will mean the end of their lives as they have come to know them. And they sense (and fear) they possess little control over such possibilities. Meanwhile, relentless consumerism and an accompanying public philosophy celebrating capitalism and privatized individualism has for some decades bred a group of leaders declaiming against community and the commons and declaring politics to be the nation's greatest problem, to be replaced by the market. In this view, all elements of society should be subsumed by the privatizing force characteristic of capitalism, whose effects should be unregulated and unbounded. All that matters, in this vision, is the realization of personal desires and the unleashing of an unencumbered market whose denizens should be supported so they may produce consumables for those who can afford to purchase them.

This dark vision of a society of individuals consumed by their personal desires and involved with no one beyond themselves has left many citizens increasingly alone with their “unchained” liberty amidst their deepening fears for the future. That is, this perspective has asked individuals to climb into an epistemic box that leaves them utterly unprotected from the vagaries and excesses of the market in the name of their “liberty to choose” as consumers. Put differently, public choices and policies have done little to ameliorate Americans’ fears about their social and economic predicament, even as those advocating for those decisions have asked that citizens accept less and less public protection against their vagaries.

Examples of the direction and consequences of this view of public policy are legion: a crumbling infrastructure because lawmakers have elected not to raise the funds to address its maintenance, a decaying education system because elected leaders have chosen to privatize major shares of it and to imagine that one may simply test for those capacities that will ensure adequate citizens and professionals, hollowed out governments at all scales asked to do more and more through intermediaries with inadequate resources while just as often pilloried for doing anything at all. Overall, too, these decades have seen a procession of Republican “leaders” and would-be leaders especially, although Democrats have hardly been immune from this impulse, whose principal aim has been to remove obstacles to the control of the nation’s political economy by capitalists and capitalism. These efforts have included a campaign to eliminate any independent voice for labor in society that might push back against capitalist influence as well as continuing initiatives aimed at reducing or removing such publicly provided citizen protections as social security and unemployment benefits.

In this dessicated vision of a cultural landscape increasingly devoid of a shared view of a society beyond the concerns of the privatized self, and in an empirical situation in which many find themselves worried about the character and pace of economic and social change resulting from continuing globalization and demographic shifts, many Americans now view the future with fear, if not alarm. In addition, they have been shaken by their own choice of public philosophy. This situation, a current scenario for millions, is ripe for demagogues willing to provide citizens a narrative that “explains” their situation by scapegoating “others,” whether the “other” is a group or institution. Thus, nearly all of the current GOP presidential candidates have been willing to condemn “immigrants” for Americans’ economic and social anxieties and to offer simple answers for the nation’s complex foreign and

domestic policy challenges. All of these blame governance and the country's public institutions for Americans' fearfulness. Deeply anxious people are more open to such democratically dangerous claims and the current electoral cycle appears to demonstrate that well-worn rule.

What is lacking in this ugly situation is imagination and trust. That is, few core Republican Party supporters question the arid ideology that keeps them so anxious and so willing to "other" their own governance. The Party's strongest supporters appear content to criticize self-governance and targeted groups for their fears, for which their leaders repeatedly tell them they need not accept any responsibility. They are asked to support public policies that continue to deepen economic and social inequality and to make their status still more perilous in the name of assuring economic growth and ensuring a continued assault on public institutions, whose very existence, these citizens are constantly informed by many of their leaders, constitutes an affront to their personal liberty.

This long-lived public ideology and its accompanying rhetoric has left a substantial share of the citizenry believing that self-governance is the source of their perceived woes and that this situation can be remedied by substituting the market for the work of democracy. Unfortunately, no such alternative exists outside of dogmatic fantasy. But to conceive of other options that actually involve self-governance requires the imagination to test the assumptions that presently animate understanding, and that many continue to believe will ultimately assuage their fears and concerns (despite the fact that they are actually exacerbating these). And it is just such a facility that Streb and her company embody. She and her dancers persistently push the envelope of possibility in their art form by deliberately testing their assumptions and seeking to discern what more may be possible. They candidly acknowledge they are often afraid to open the metaphorical next door and to view new and previously unimagined paths, but they have learned to trust one another deeply and have come to realize that remaining where they are in their awareness and understanding will spell the decay of their artistry and, more deeply, of their very opportunity for continued discovery together. Innovation and vitality depend on their willingness to trust themselves and the common claim their work together represents. Each new step both tests and deepens that shared bond and vision.

As it is with artistry, so it is with self-governance. The present assault on government has many cowering in a room behind a door bolted by their collective lack of trust in one another and skepticism of the need for

a common governance enterprise. These forces together have kept many citizens from striking out to imagine new possibilities and to realize that any democratic future lies in a shared claim in the need to trust and to journey together. Streb and her company embody deep lessons for our nation's citizens and politics. Their willingness to take risks and to imagine together that new possibilities will yield additional paths for collective exploration are a superb metaphor for the capacities necessary for rediscovering the potential and requisites for self-governance in our polity. One may hope that this nation's citizens soon will shake loose their self-imposed bonds and once again believe it relevant and possible to imagine what a free and democratic society might look like. It will take courage and imagination and trust in one another to do so and someone must call for a start. Without these steps, we may expect continued demagogic claims, the prizing of privatized consumerism in lieu of freedom and a citizenry ever more fearful for its individual and collective future.

(Originally published October 11, 2015)

Notes

- ¹ Gund, Catherine and Selvaratnam (Producers), & Gund, Catherine (Director). 2014. *Born to Fly* [Documentary]. United States: Aubin Pictures.

64 A Flâneur Reflects on the Simmering Crisis in American Politics

I read an essay recently in *The New York Times* concerning the virtues of *flânerie* or “attentive strolling” in Paris during this lovely time of year. That lyrical reflection by Elaine Sciolino set me musing about another story I was sure I had seen two years ago concerning the idea.¹ My search was rewarded when I found Bijan Stephen’s excellent paean to the flâneur in the *Paris Review* and reread it.² Here is how Stephen described the flâneur and how the term has often come to be employed in modern literary and political studies:

The figure of the flâneur—the stroller, the passionate wanderer emblematic of nineteenth-century French literary culture—has always been essentially timeless; he removes himself from the world while he stands astride its heart. When Walter Benjamin brought Baudelaire’s conception of the flâneur into the academy, he marked the idea as an essential part of our ideas of modernism and urbanism. For Benjamin, in his critical examinations of Baudelaire’s work, the flâneur heralded an incisive analysis of modernity, perhaps because of his connotations: ‘[the flâneur] was a figure of the modern artist-poet, a figure keenly aware of the bustle of modern life, an amateur detective and investigator of the city, but also a sign of the alienation of the city and of capitalism,’ as a [2004 article](#) in the *American Historical Review* put it. Since Benjamin, the academic establishment has used the flâneur as a vehicle for the examination of the conditions of modernity—urban life, alienation, class tensions, and the like.³

As I imagined a flâneur walking in Paris (or perhaps in New York, or even the small city where I live), I wondered what he or she (flâneuse) might think of an argument by Jay Cost that I had read some days ago in the *Wall Street Journal*, “The Politics of Distrust,” as he or she stopped for coffee and to linger over the day’s newspaper.⁴ Cost, a staff writer for the conservative

magazine, *The Weekly Standard*, suggested in his essay that our nation's politics was now typified by distrust and began as follows:

We live in extraordinary and distressing political times. The elected branches of the U.S. government seem paralyzed, incapable of governing except to avert crises. The president accuses his opponents in Congress of virulent opposition to even the most common-sense measures, while they accuse him of trampling the Constitution. Voters outside the Beltway are totally dispirited, and insofar as they are engaged in the political process, they are increasingly drawn to flamboyant populists of the left and the right, who make wild promises that cannot possibly be fulfilled.⁵

Following this introduction, Cost went on to assess a number of common arguments aimed at explaining this extraordinarily significant phenomenon for the health and legitimacy of democratic governance, and to dismiss each as inadequate in turn:

- The GOP has turned sharply to the right, with many of its representatives and devotees exhibiting libertarian, if not nihilistic positions and tendencies. This explanation was insufficient according to Cost, as it did not provide an account of why this has occurred. Moreover, some supporters of the Democratic Party, too, have shown a tendency thus far in this presidential race to support candidates not long ago considered “unusual,” if not extreme, i.e., Senator Bernie Sanders.
- Our House districts are so sharply gerrymandered that the extreme character of their constituencies explains our present political pass. But, this explanation, too, according to Cost, is unsatisfactory, as we have always had some degree of gerrymandering in our political process. More than this, Americans of all partisan views appear dissatisfied and gerrymandering cannot explain that turn.
- Cost also dismissed arguments that the country's citizens are anxious as a result of the decline of the social regulatory mechanism previously embodied in the mainline Protestant churches, or as a consequence of an upswing in immigration in recent decades.

After this brief overview, Cost sought to argue that a quickening of the nation's economic growth rate to earlier levels would do a very great deal to overcome the deep polarization and lack of trust now so emblematic of our politics. As he concluded,

The tonic to this situation is as obvious as it is elusive: economic growth that approximates the levels of the late 20th century. For now, that should be the priority of both parties. Whatever its faults, the postwar political consensus was the most durable and productive in American history, and there is no obvious alternative to it. If the country can somehow find its way back to 3 percent growth, look for our problems to ease over time. If not, look for the nation's anxiety to persist, and even worse.⁶

Now, to return to our flâneur or flâneuse as he or she sips coffee and considers Cost's arguments, I found myself imagining this individual asking *The Weekly Standard's* writer several questions. First, why is gerrymandering not important as a partial explanation of our current politics, because "it has always been with us in some measure"? Strongly gerrymandered districts imply sharply partisan and divided politics by definition and elected officials who must appeal to such voters or risk losing their seats. Moreover, our presidential nomination structure was shaped in the 1970s around primaries in which the most partisan voters most often vote, a situation that did not obtain so fully historically. It is not enough to dismiss the significance of this factor by contending that elected officials have long engaged in gerrymandering.

Second, our flâneur might wonder how 40 years of attacks on government and governance aligned disproportionately with the GOP can be ignored as a factor in explaining rising levels of citizen mistrust of America's public institutions. Republican representatives today not only claim to revere the market as a supposed alternative to self-governance, but have gone much further, to attack President Barack Obama personally and to question his citizenship, and to do so repeatedly in the face of widespread criticism and all evidence to the contrary. This now established pattern among many Republican elected officials of delegitimizing behavior aimed at government leaders and institutions, encouraged by their supporters, can hardly be dismissed as "something all are doing" or have done, as such is manifestly not the case.

Third, our flâneur might inquire why it is that membership in the Protestant faith traditions, if as important as Cost suggests, has declined so markedly in recent decades in the United States, and ask if it might be linked in any way to the dominance of the public philosophy of neo-liberalism and its devotion to materialism and the market, and to the accompanying claim that government is the nation's most significant "problem," pressed most fervently by the GOP.

Fourth and related, our stroller might ask why the materialism now so firmly ensconced in the United States, with its accompanying redefinition of liberty as a capacity to consume, will be assuaged with a higher rate of economic growth, or why such might not simply lead to still deeper privatism and cynicism. That is, while Cost seems to believe growth will serve as a wonder drug to cure citizen unease and fear, he says nothing about the more profound changes now afoot in American politics as a result of our collective neo-liberal turn.

Finally, and perhaps most deeply, our flâneuse might ask if more money for some individuals would actually relieve the enduring existential modern condition of anxiety wrought by globalization, neo-liberalism and the ever-present potential of terrorism. How would more spending power for some, or for many, alleviate or change the continuing powerful influence of these vital shaping forces in our culture? Taken together, one might view Cost's arguments as an analogy to our decades-long search as a culture for a substitute for the responsibility for self-governance. Many of our political leaders have argued, in absolutist terms, that capitalism can replace self-governance, and that virtually any form of government action, by definition, fetters personal freedom.

There seems to be no single reason why so many Americans have apparently accepted this claim as an article of ideological faith, nor any simple remedy for its deeply deleterious effects for democratic self-governance. Overall, even a sharply higher economic growth rate, whatever its virtues, will not prove a solution for the very difficult situation in which Americans have now placed their regime and their governance. Our present simmering political crisis, in significant measure a self-inflicted wound, will not soon be cured by calls for more of the same calumny that helped create it. One suspects our flâneur or flâneuse might set off after finishing their coffee with a much heavier heart.

(Originally published October 25, 2015)

Notes

¹ Sciolino, Elaine. 2015. "The Flâneur Discovers Paris, a Step at a Time," *The New York Times*, October 2. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/fashion/the-flaneur-discovers-paris-a-step-at-a-time.html?_r=0.

² Stephen, Bijan. 2013. "In Praise of the Flâneur," *The Paris Review*, October 17. Available at: <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/10/17/in-praise-of-the-flaneur/>.

³ Stephen, "In Praise of the Flâneur."

⁴ Cost, Jay. 2015. "The Politics of Distrust," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 16. Available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-politics-of-distrust-1445015969>.

⁵ Cost, "The Politics of Distrust."

⁶ Cost, "The Politics of Distrust."

65 Outrageous Rhetoric, Political Alienation and Democratic Deliberation

GOP presidential candidate Ben Carson recently surpassed Donald Trump in opinion polls for the first time among potential Republican voters in the February Iowa Caucuses, and I was struck to see that he is perceived positively by supporters for his apparently soft-spoken demeanor, irrespective of his often controversial policy stands and remarks. For example, one interviewee, a retired woman from Ames, Donna Christiansen, told a *New York Times* reporter on October 25, “He is kind when he speaks, and he doesn’t have an agenda to set himself up as wonderful.”¹ Miriam Greenfield described by *The Times* as “a farmer in Jewell, Iowa,” suggested, “That smile and his soft voice make people very comforted (sic).”² Jason Walke, a trial lawyer from Ames, told the same reporter that no other GOP candidate “has a snowball’s chance of changing things in Washington the way Ben Carson does. I believe someone as mild-mannered and gentlemanly as Ben Carson is just about the only kind of person that could.”³

Now, this turn, and this sort of citizen justification for it, is worth remarking for several reasons. The first is the paradox of voters offering support despite Carson’s frequently outlandish comments. For example, he has compared Federal Government efforts to ensure health insurance for all Americans to slavery:

Obamacare is the worst thing that has happened in this nation since slavery. Slavery was a horrible thing and affected many people in horrible ways, some of those effects are still present today. So, no, it is not the same as slavery, however, what needs to be understood here is that the way this country was set up, the people—we the people were set up at the pinnacle of power in this nation. The government is supposed to conform to our will. By taking the most important thing you have, your health and your health care, and turning that over to the government, you fundamentally shift the power, a huge chunk of it, from the people to the government. This is not the direction that we want the government to go in this nation.⁴

Whatever else might be said of these observations, which Carson has refused to rescind, it seems clear that the Affordable Care Act in no sense turned citizens' health over to government control or imposed any requirements even remotely resembling slavery in seeking to secure its stated aim of helping provide access to health care for those millions of Americans otherwise not able to obtain it. Carson's analogy is so grotesque and so wildly inappropriate that it has led to vigorous criticism from across the political spectrum. But, notably, the growing group of Carson supporters in Iowa report they are not concerned about what this belief might say about their currently preferred Republican presidential candidate's fitness for office.

Carson has also likened the U.S. to Nazi Germany, while misreading history and outrageously distorting current events to do so:

Nazi Germany experienced something horrible. The people in Nazi Germany largely didn't believe in what Hitler was doing. But they didn't say anything. Of course not, they kept their mouth shut. The fact that our government is using instruments of government like the IRS to punish its opponents, this is not the kind of thing that is a Democrat or a Republican issue. This is an American issue. ... A lot of people do not feel free to express themselves.⁵

This statement is simply nonsense in historical terms, as millions of Germans did, in fact, support Hitler and Nazism. It also profoundly and misleadingly caricatures what actually occurred in a recent IRS investigation of tax-exempt organizations. There is no evidence that President Obama or anyone else serving in the current administration is systematically targeting any law abiding American as a result of his or her political beliefs.

Carson has employed another false analogy to Nazism to suggest that the victims of the Holocaust would have fared better had they been better armed. Here is how he sought to explain that statement (originally offered earlier at the National Press Club) to CNN's Wolf Blitzer:

Basically, what I said is that when tyranny occurs traditionally around the world, they try and disarm the people first. And that is exactly what happened in Germany. You know, mid- to late 30s they started a program to disarm the people and by mid- to late 40's, look what had happened. I think the likelihood of Hitler being able to accomplish his goals would have been greatly diminished if the people had been

armed. I'm telling you there is a reason these dictatorial people take the guns first.⁶

This assertion is notable for appearing, incredibly, to demand that the victims be held partly responsible for the Shoah. Moreover, it is deeply offensive for the parallel it implies to the United States today. In fact, no one is the target of systematic murderous persecution and no one in government is seeking in absolute terms to deprive Americans of access to firearms in our nation today. Both intimations are not simply empirically false; they are madly off the mark.

Carson offered a very similar argument in the wake of the recent mass shooting at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, suggesting that those nearby should have rushed the shooter and fewer people would have been murdered. In fact, one individual did so and was killed. That said, his remarks, which appeared to imply that those killed were partially responsible for the tragic events that befell them, were both offensive and appallingly insensitive. Nevertheless, despite these patent distortions, a plurality of likely GOP Iowa caucus voters is now supporting Carson. According to media reports, these citizens are making their political choices on the basis of “character,” rather than policy positions. As with ascribing presidential fitness to Carson because he is soft spoken, I think this contention is deeply misleading. Deciding to support the former physician because he is not a public bombast is not to come to a considered judgment on his character. Indeed, it says virtually nothing about his character. One can be deeply malevolent and soft spoken, or the reverse, extraordinarily kind and empathetic and loudly ebullient. These voters are not evaluating Carson’s character, which is revealed far more deeply by his statements concerning health care access, guns and mass murder, and the IRS than by his demeanor during interviews and speeches.

What these citizens seem to be judging instead is a vague image they have gleaned of the candidate that they contrast with other leaders, who are engaged in rancorous debate. These voters appear to be hoping against hope that Carson’s pleasant, seemingly nonthreatening bearing would suffice to convince those otherwise in conflict to “play nice now.” One might share the desire such could occur and still be amazed at how utterly undeliberatively these citizens have behaved in coming to this perspective. In fact, what Carson represents as a candidate is, at best, a barrage of empty and platitudinous declarations that reveal almost no knowledge of policy

realities, and at worst, a batty set of often ugly claims. Indeed, taking his remarks at face value, Carson often appears to be unhinged from reality in his observations.

In short, the willingness of these Iowa voters to embrace an individual based on his apparent deportment, and to dismiss his comments in doing so, hardly constitutes a model of deliberation, either of character or of policy proposals, and certainly not of both. While, as Joan Didion has aptly suggested in *Political Fictions*, it may be that the thoroughly mediatized and hyper-planned American political campaign process has become “perilously remote from the electorate it was meant to represent,” only citizens can remedy that situation, and they cannot do so by abandoning all prudence in their judgments of political figures and their behavior.⁷

One can see this turn for Carson in Iowa, whether lasting or not, as a window into two key ongoing concerns in American politics: the disaffection among large shares of the electorate from governance and politics on the basis, at least in part, of its ever-more carefully staged and mediated character, and the decline of deliberative capacity or willingness to do so (or perhaps both) among voters. Both trends should give partisans of democracy pause, for both are poisonous for its maintenance in the long term. Rather than concocting ever more egregious stories designed to enrage, disaffect and mobilize “population segments” to the polls, our candidates and elected officials instead should assume some responsibility for encouraging more reasoned citizen deliberation and engagement beyond the specious, “I like the way he (or she) looks, speaks or dresses.”

(Originally published November 9, 2015)

Notes

¹ Gabriel, Trip. 2015. “Calm Manner has Ben Carson Rising in Polls,” *The New York Times*, October 25. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/26/us/politics/calm-manner-has-ben-carson-rising-in-polls.html>.

² Gabriel, “Calm Manner has Ben Carson Rising.”

³ Gabriel, “Calm Manner has Ben Carson Rising.”

⁴ Bobic, Igor. 2014. “Ben Carson Stands by Nazi Germany, Slavery Comparisons,” *The Huffington Post*, December 3. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/03/ben-carson-nazi-germany-slavery_n_6263508.html.

⁵ Bobic, “Ben Carson Stands by Nazi Germany.”

⁶ Scott, Eugene. 2015. “Ben Carson explains Holocaust Comments,” CNN

Politics, October 9. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/08/politics/ben-carson-gun-control-2016-election/>.

⁷ Didion, Joan. 2001. *Political Fictions*. New York: Random House, p.8.

66 A Tipping Point in American Politics

Alexander Hamilton argued in *The Federalist Papers* (No. 72) that political leaders in the new American regime would be motivated by a love of fame, and that incentive would encourage them to “plan and undertake extensive and arduous enterprises for the public benefit,” assuming that they would receive due recognition for their efforts.¹ In short, for the Founders, a democratic leader’s self-interested desire for power and standing could ultimately redound to the public weal, but only if accompanied by a specific orientation. The challenge was not to imagine purely altruistic leaders, but to identify incentives to persuade them to pursue others-oriented behaviors that would serve the public interest, rather than merely seeking power or personal aggrandizement.

Office holders and those running for election could surely evidence self-interest in their pursuit of power in this view, but Hamilton’s definition of leadership required that elected leaders (and candidates) not *simply* seek office for the personal gratification and status it might confer. Hamilton contended that would-be leaders’ awareness of the implications of their behavior for how they later would be regarded would temper their excess and prevent them from usurping freedom in naked pursuit of power. That is, their awareness of how history would treat them and their concern for their long-term reputation and what Hamilton called “fame” would rein in their willingness to fan the flames of popular fears or ignorance, or engage in demagoguery, because practicing these would ensure they would be remembered only as enemies of freedom and of the true interests of the people.

This was surely one of the key ways by which the Founders sought to prevent leaders from taking steps that would undermine freedom and self-governance, but there were others as well. The Framers imagined, for example, that a property requirement as a requisite for office would cause elected leaders to think twice before undermining freedoms, as they would have a material reason not to do so. However, we have long since abandoned such prerequisites for candidates pursuing office. In addition, the Framers required that all elected to public office must take a solemn oath to uphold the Constitution, which enshrines individual freedom while ensuring a

common capability to act for the public good (at least one hopes such will obtain more often than not). The Founders also created a well-known system of institutional checks and balances designed to work to prevent the emergence of individual and majority tyranny.

In addition, it seems clear that the Framers simply assumed that individuals of judicious temperament and thoughtful disposition would seek office and that their natural talents would garner them stature in elections. The Founders hoped that the electorate would itself be prudent in its choice-making, and when it was not, that the regime's institutions and its leaders could stymie their worst impulses toward tyranny. Finally, while the Framers did not envision political parties as important social mediating institutions, these emerged soon after the nation was founded and came (ideally, if not always perfectly) to play significant roles in sifting popular passions to ensure that political leaders were not simply demagogues bent on mobilizing individuals on the basis of their worst instincts.

The current 2016 national campaign, especially as it is now being pursued by the many individuals seeking the Republican Party presidential nomination, suggests strongly that many of the checks against leaders practicing demagoguery the Founders envisioned are no longer in place or are actively under assault. This is so for a number of reasons, which are worth outlining briefly. First, political parties often no longer control who gains their nomination for various offices, including the presidency. Parties' capacity to determine nomination outcomes has been in decline since the early 1970s with the broad adoption of primary driven electoral processes. Primary voters, who typically do not represent the broader body politic, cast ballots in these elections, skewing their results profoundly. That fact is a major concern as the current GOP nomination process unfolds and Republican candidates seek to appeal to often exceedingly radical primary voters.

Second, during roughly the same period (late 1970s to the present) and with increasing speed, mass communications outlets have segmented to serve specific groups within the general population in a phenomenon political scientist Austin Ranney early labeled "narrow casting."² These entities tell their viewers what they want to see or show or hear, and perhaps more precisely, what will secure continued viewership or listenership, to ensure their profitability. The growth of the right-wing entertainment industry and of Fox Television News (which is part of that industry), with their obvious ideological perspective, represent cases in point. Voters tuning

into such media may listen to or see what they wish to hear or witness. If they are fearful, they can turn to these media sources and have those concerns confirmed and amplified and be informed further that their apprehensions are the consequence of convenient political targets.

The radio, television and internet businesses so engaged profit handsomely from this sort of apocalyptic blamecasting and there is little to offset their claims, especially if a voter is already predisposed to believe them, even when those assertions are divorced from reality. This development is remaking our presidential nomination process, as evidenced by the emergence of Donald Trump and Ben Carson, both of whom meet classic definitions to be regarded as demagogues. Trump has repeatedly engaged in vicious and vacuous fear mongering and, most recently, in fascistic claims concerning immigrants and refugees, and often been shown by fact-checkers to play fast and loose with the truth. None of this appears to matter to his supporters who are prepared to believe the outlets they follow and to back his anti-democratic claims, on the view that he will alleviate their existential state of fear and set all right through his forceful personality. Carson has likewise adopted profoundly anti-democratic positions and has nonetheless been supported by his followers, even when his claims about his personal history or policy stands have been found to be false or without basis. He has simply told his followers that mainstream media do not “like him” and are therefore not to be believed when they reveal his falsehoods.

Third, the Supreme Court’s decision to allow all but unfettered campaign spending in its Citizens United decision in 2010 has transformed the national political nomination process. Since that ruling, corporate and personal campaign spending has exploded, and one consequence, given the cost of political campaigns, is that the very wealthy may now spend their own funds as they wish to pursue public office as well as conduct orchestrated efforts on behalf of their favored candidates. Both phenomena have been much in evidence this electoral cycle. The Court’s decision has provided space for Republican presidential candidates Donald Trump and Carly Fiorina, for example, to spend considerable sums from their personal fortunes to pursue their political aspirations, and for the billionaire Koch Brothers openly to press for (and fund the campaigns of) the election of anti-government and libertarian candidates.

All of these trends together have created a Kafkaesque moment in our current politics, in which shares of the population (GOP primary voters) support individuals shown repeatedly to be uninformed and often dishonest,

and who routinely have maligned and scapegoated immigrants and refugees and pretended that wild rhetoric will “solve” the country’s complex challenges. Vilification of others and exploitation of citizens’ fears will never result in meaningful efforts to address the nation’s problems, but they surely threaten and undermine our regime’s dedication to freedom. The daily more bizarre and outrageous GOP presidential nomination process suggests our nation is at a crossroads. Can our citizenry discipline itself in favor of its hard-won freedoms, or will it sacrifice those to empty promises and demagogic claims in the name of its fears? The would-be GOP nominees have shown no willingness to countenance Hamilton’s argument that they should discipline themselves in the name of how history will regard the implications of their behavior for the common good. That leaves Republican voters in the nomination process (whose behavior and predilections to date do not give much hope), and the general electorate later, as the lone bulwarks against demagoguery. The open question is whether either will evidence the deliberative capacity to resist a possible regime tragedy. The nation stands at a political tipping point, with its fundamental devotion to freedom hanging in the balance.

(Originally published December 7, 2015)

Notes

¹ Rossiter, Clinton. 1961. Ed. *The Federalist Papers*. New York: New American Library, p. 437.

² Ranney, Austin. 1990. “Broadcasting, Narrowcasting, and Politics,” in Anthony King, Ed. 2nd ed., *The New American Political System*. Washington, D.C.: The AEI Press, p.175.

SECTION III
PRELUDE TO A CRISIS
(JUNE 2016-JUNE 2017)

67 A House Divided: Blaming the Poor

One of the more paradoxical trends affecting our nation's politics today is the phenomenon of voters in very poor districts who had long supported the Democratic Party becoming solidly Republican in recent elections. One example is Pike County, Kentucky, one of the poorest jurisdictions in the United States. The county, which is just across the border from southwestern Virginia, is located squarely in Appalachia. It is extremely poor, has very high mortality, morbidity and unemployment rates and yet now routinely votes for very conservative Republicans, including the state's libertarian senator, Rand Paul. Since Paul, like the majority of his Party's leaders, now almost daily speaks against the government offering anything more than an extremely limited safety net, some authors have suggested that voters in Pike County and other similarly economically distressed jurisdictions evidencing the same trend are voting against their own interests. In fact, disproportionate numbers of individuals in Pike County do depend on government support for survival, whether because of a disability, often as a result of black lung or orthopedic problems arising from past work in now shuttered coal mines, or because of joblessness arising from the ongoing decline in employment, as traditional industries (principally coal mining in Pike County) continue an inexorable fall.

Indeed, as long ago as 2004, Thomas Frank, in his best-selling book, *What's the Matter with Kansas*, suggested that many of the nation's working class and lower middle class voters often voted against their own interests as they supported GOP candidates who had no interest in continuing the public programs that sustained their families.¹ Frank argued that the Republican Party had squared this apparent circle by luring these individuals with its values-related stands concerning abortion and claims that Democrats aimed to take away their right to own guns and to hunt.

Whether that is so is debatable, but the trend of poor communities supporting conservative Republican candidates is surely constructed on at least two additional paradoxes. First, as Frank also argued, individuals who have begun in recent years to vote GOP, but who live in areas heavily dependent on state-sponsored safety net offerings, have suggested to pollsters they are doing so because they resent the rise of dependence on

those programs in their communities by individuals whose moral worth they concomitantly have begun to question. That is, these voters have remained employed, often as teachers or firefighters or in other similar capacities (ironically, many of which are governmental), as the economy of their communities has continued to decline—in Appalachia that has coincided with the waning of the coal industry—while relatives, neighbors and acquaintances have lost their jobs. The obvious paradox here is that there are fewer opportunities for all citizens where these voters live, and those residing in these areas may not possess the educations or capacities to compete for such posts as may be available, for whatever complex sets of reasons. Nevertheless, their employed neighbors begrudge them their perilous status.

That is, as Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer of Johns Hopkins University have found, those individuals located in the second lowest quintile of the income ladder begin strongly in these situations of overall community decline to disassociate themselves from those now at the bottom.² Rather than empathize with those in the quartile beneath them, these citizens begin to despise their neighbors now in poverty and agree with GOP candidate arguments that their friends' condition is their own responsibility alone, for which society need not accept any claim. Importantly, the needy individuals now the targets of active discrimination by their fellow citizens did not create globalization, nor do they control the choices that have sent their communities into an economic tailspin. In short, reality is considerably more complicated than those now casting aspersion on their neighbors contend it to be. Nonetheless, in this working and lower middle class group's view, their jobless fellow citizens have become dependent creatures taking money from their pockets, rather than working. This ascribed stereotype neatly fits Americans' age-old propensity to distinguish between the worthy and unworthy poor, but in this case these slightly better off citizens have subtly shifted this axiom so as to label nearly all people now receiving public support (mostly in the form of food stamps or disability support in Kentucky and elsewhere in Appalachia) as weak and morally contemptuous, irrespective of the causes of their impoverished condition or their personal capacity to address those.

In this way, and in an interesting, if lamentable, sense, these citizens are practicing a kind of class-based discrimination or classism. In their zeal to justify and legitimate their own position in the socioeconomic firmament, these individuals now identify with those better off than they are while

heaping contempt on their now “dependent” former peers so as to separate themselves from those individuals. They then begin to support politically those who provide a narrative that legitimates their discriminatory stance. Now, none of this is to argue that all of those unemployed and receiving support are angels, but that really is not the point. The question is whether citizens as community are prepared to act to address reality, whatever its complexities. In these jurisdictions at least, where joblessness has become a fact of life for many, they have not been. Instead, they have elected to blame unemployed individuals for their situations and to characterize them as lazy lay-abouts. They have also begun to vote for politicians who echo and reinforce that description and blame the jobless alone for their situations.

In an odd way, this dynamic points to a second paradox implicit in the scenario of poor and economically declining areas supporting leaders who run for office arguing they will work to deepen the penury of those already suffering: those most affected by the decline in these communities, the most poor, have stopped voting. For example, even as the number of individuals receiving Supplemental Nutritional Assistance in Pike County, Kentucky, reached more than 17,000 this year, the total number of individuals voting in the November 2015 gubernatorial election in the county of 63,000 fell to just 11,233. Those most afflicted by declining economic conditions are not voting while those just above them in the economic pecking order are doing so and “othering” their fellow citizens now mired in poverty.

This scenario has several implications. First, those who do not vote in democracies will generally be ignored. If the poor do not vote, they will likely continue to be fodder for ambitious leaders scapegoating them and the conditions they confront for a receptive audience. Second, given this political reality in many jurisdictions, it seems clear the poor will not only endure continued degradation and indignity, but their life conditions may well deteriorate further simultaneously, since in many of the affected communities, cultural mythology notwithstanding, there are few or no jobs for those now suffering unemployment to substitute for public support. Whether that fact can be changed in the longer pull remains an open question, but it appears that the poor and jobless will endure social stigmatization and all that entails for the foreseeable future.

Finally, this reality has implications for democratic governance, as it amounts to a spreading and popularly supported form of discrimination against one segment of the population, an anathema to democratic principles and possibility. The result, should this trend persist, will be ever

more hollow communities and an increased likelihood not only of even greater levels of economic inequality and destitution in the population, but also of decreased social capacity to respond to the very real challenges the underlying economic conditions now characterizing these communities represent.

This situation constitutes a festering social crisis of large proportions not wholly unlike that on which Abraham Lincoln remarked when accepting his Party's senatorial nomination on June 16, 1858. The future U.S. President used his speech to address the nation's growing division concerning slavery. One might well contend that systematic social discrimination and degradation of the poor encouraged by one of the nation's major political parties represents a similar challenge to the sinews of our society or to the character of the American Union.

As with slavery in 1858, the political scapegoating afoot in Pike County, Kentucky, and elsewhere today cannot be permitted to continue. This has nothing to do with whether one favors or opposes the Party benefitting from this turn as a partisan matter. Rather, the costs for self-governance of allowing this scenario to endure are simply too high to be accepted. As Lincoln observed concerning slavery, one might well warn regarding today's popular willingness to discriminate against the poor and downtrodden:

We are now far into the *fifth* year, since a policy was initiated, with the *avowed* object, and *confident* promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation.

Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, *not ceased*, but has *constantly augmented*. In my opinion, it *will* not cease, until a *crisis* shall have been reached, and passed.

'A house divided against itself cannot stand.'

I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*. I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved*—I do not expect the house to *fall*—but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided.

It will become *all* one thing or *all* the other.³

The issue that arises, as a substantial portion of our citizenry continues to evidence a willingness to deride and to discriminate against a share of its own, is what sort of polity we wish collectively to be. The answer to that query remains unclear, but it is of fundamental importance to the nation's future.

(Originally published January 4, 2016)

Notes

¹Frank, Thomas, 2004. *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books.

²Edin, Kathryn and H. Luke Shaefer, 2015. *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

³Lincoln, Abraham, 1858. "House Divided Speech." Abraham Lincoln Online, Speeches and Writings. Available at: <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/house.htm> (emphasis in the original speech).

68 Guns, Ugly Fantasies and Democratic Politics

Our regional newspaper, *The Roanoke Times*, ran a story recently about a newly formed group in the area called the Sons of Liberty Southwest Virginia that staged a small demonstration along a busy thoroughfare “to exercise our constitutional rights to assemble peacefully and to bear arms.”¹ The account indicated that the participants, mostly white males, brought an array of firearms to the event, and an accompanying photo showed an individual with an assault rifle. The group’s leader and founder, Daniel Highberger, said to the reporting journalist that, “it is my belief that our constitutional rights are being infringed upon, slowly but surely.”² Highberger’s group is part of a larger movement whose members are called the Three Percenters, who believe that only 3 percent of colonists fought to win independence in the American Revolution (a proposition not supported by empirical evidence) and that “government is moving closer to the path of tyranny and citizens must be prepared to defend their liberty” (a claim for which there is also no evidence).³ Three Percenters often argue conspiratorially that the national government intends soon to confiscate all weapons from the citizenry and they pledge to resist such efforts by force. The loosely knit organization is aligned with the equally militaristic Oath Keepers. Major human rights watch dog groups classify both entities as anti-government and extremist in character.

Apparently, the Roanoke group, several of whose members indicated they carry firearms each day “to protect themselves,” staged the demonstration out of concern about President Barack Obama’s announced intention to use his executive authority to strengthen background checks, study new gun safety technologies and otherwise work to ensure that firearms may be accessed only by mentally healthy law-abiding citizens. Rather than viewing these proposals as the very limited steps they represent, these individuals instead saw them as governmental efforts to take away their right to possess firearms. In fact, Congress, under the influence of the well-organized National Rifle Association (NRA), has stymied recent attempts to take action to regulate gun purchases more fully, even after the slaughter of 20 school children and six adults in December 2012 in a mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, by an obsessed individual and many similar episodes since.

In any case, since President Obama made clear at his recent announcement that he was not contemplating the seizure or banning of the right to own firearms for any law abiding citizen, and since there is indeed no evidence that any such draconian action will occur, it is important to ask two questions: How did these Roanokers come to believe a proposition that bears no relationship to reality, and why are they so fearful that many of the 50 participating in the event carry weapons each day? One might also ask of whom or of what precisely are these individuals afraid. More, one might inquire how seeking to close loopholes in an otherwise widely accepted background checks system prior to gun purchase portends government tyranny.

One explanation a number of analysts have plausibly offered for this sort of citizen action—whether by this group, by adherents of the so-called Tea Party or by the small group of armed misanthropes now occupying a federal wildlife refuge facility in Oregon, in the face of no factual confirmation to prompt or support it, is that the individuals and groups have been whipped into such conspiratorial paranoia by the consistent onslaught of entertainment industry elements willing to play to their fears for profit. I suspect there is much to that argument. Broadcast media networks and their “star” personalities, including Rush Limbaugh and Mark Levin on radio as well as Ann Coulter and Bill O’Reilly on television, have made huge sums for many years telling Americans to fear the “other,” whether in the form of their governments, immigrants or changing norms and values, and to pillory these as the imagined architects of their unease. In the specific case of guns, the National Rifle Association, in close partnership with weapons manufacturers, has for decades shrilly labeled any effort to regulate access to firearms as an attack on the Second Amendment, which that group has essentialized and absolutized.

Notably, the NRA has taken this stance and its representatives have labeled federal law enforcement agents and any others who might argue for a more prudent and less hysterical stance as “jack-booted” thugs. This representation, for which the group was forced to apologize in 1995 when it outraged then-President George W. Bush, is noteworthy because it is precisely how GOP presidential candidate and U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Florida) chose to portray President Obama last week on his website, following the chief executive’s recent gun-related announcement. Cruz depicted the President in helmet and jackboots, “coming for your guns.” While empirically ridiculous, this misrepresentation of reality was certainly consonant with

past NRA and conservative talk-radio and television rhetoric. More broadly, Cruz epitomizes that significant portion of the Republican Party that has long sought votes by railing against the presumed criminal wiles of the government writ large or of the poor or minorities of various sorts.

These depictions are routinely cruel and wildly misleading. Nonetheless, they have resonated especially with a group of fear-filled Americans desiring to find scapegoats and willing to demonize and absolutize in the name of their fears. That these appeals are a form of demagoguery, and that they have been growing in number and kind, few sober-minded analysts and scholars doubt. That we have now reached a point that groups such as the newly formed Three Percenters in Roanoke believe them, even against all empirical evidence to the contrary, also seems clear. What is less certain is when and how this turn in our politics might galvanize a majority and result in genuine, as opposed to imagined, tyranny. Nonetheless, it is now clear that danger is real.

Joschka Fischer, Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor of Germany from 1998-2005, has recently captured many of the deeper reasons for this move to the fascistic and demagogic in American and other Western nation politics. As he observed in a commentary in late December 2015:

First and foremost, there is fear—and apparently a great deal of it. It is a fear based on the instinctive realization that the “White Man’s World”—a lived reality assumed by its beneficiaries as a matter of course—is in terminal decline, both globally and in the societies of the West. And migration is the issue that brings that prognosis home (not just metaphorically) to today’s angst-inspired nationalists. Until recently, globalization was largely viewed as favoring the West. But now—in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and with the rise of China—it has become increasingly clear that globalization is a two-way street, with the West losing much of its power and wealth to the East. Likewise, the world’s problems can no longer be suppressed and excluded, at least not in Europe, where they are now quite literally knocking on the door. Meanwhile, at home, the White Man’s World is threatened by immigration, globalization of labor markets, gender parity, and the legal and social emancipation of sexual minorities. In short, these societies are undergoing a fundamental shock to traditional roles and patterns of behavior. From all these profound changes has arisen a yearning for simple solutions—to build fences

and walls, for example, whether in the US South or in southern Hungary—and strong leaders.⁴

In this view, many of those now supporting Cruz's cynical calls for elimination of the Internal Revenue Service or Donald Trump's jingoistic, discriminatory and derisive politics are looking for someone to tell them that the insecurity they feel and the changes they see occurring about them are the product of someone or something that can be simply addressed. These leaders and others are providing these restive individuals fodder by way of claims against a never-really defined "establishment," and the embrace of strong-man (read fascistic) politics. The working-class and lower middle-class white men disproportionately supporting Trump and Cruz realize that their worlds are being upended and that their traditional place of eminence and superiority within them is no longer secure, and these candidates are providing them uncomplicated "answers" for their fears in the form of chauvinistic anti-immigrant and anti-establishment appeals. The insecurity wrought by the stagnation in their real wages that has afflicted these groups for decades—often abetted, ironically, by GOP pressed policies—has been exacerbated by a dizzying rate of social change that has diminished their relative status. Many in this group "know" this deeply, but cannot name its sources and so look for targets to blame. Across America and other Western nations those marks of ire, as in the 1930s, are government, minorities, immigrants and the poor, and once again those coming forward to press this dogmatism are demagogues willing to trade in fear and hate to gain power.

The twin forces of persistent political and broadcast incitement, coupled with what Fischer aptly dubbed "nationalist angst" arising from global economic and social change, are creating conditions for the development of groups such as the Sons of Liberty Southwest Virginia, mobilized paradoxically against their birthright of genuine freedom in the name of an empty virility and hollow fears. Whether those seeking to profit politically from the deep insecurity of members of these groups will succeed electorally remains unclear, but their influence as they work to do so is already evident on our local city streets.

(Originally published January 18, 2016)

Notes

¹ Petska, Alicia. 2016. "Gun rights supporters rally in Roanoke," *The Roanoke Times*, January 11, Virginia, p.1.

² Petska, “Gun rights supporters rally,” p. 1.

³ Petska, “Gun rights supporters rally,” p.2.

⁴ Fischer, Joschka. 2015. “The fascism of the affluent,” *Project Syndicate: The World’s Opinion Page*, December 28. Available at: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/affluent-fascists-western-politics-by-joschka-fischer-2015-12>.

69 The State of the Union: An Angst-Filled Trajectory for Self-Governance

President Barack Obama delivered his final State of the Union Address on January 12, and he sought in it to highlight much of the acerbic negativism, demagoguery and evocations of fear that have thus far characterized the Republican candidates' dialogue as they vie for their Party's presidential nomination. He called for loyal opposition, cooperation and union rather than the polarized rancor, cynicism and meanness now distinguishing the GOP race and indeed, U.S. politics more generally. In rather Lincolnesque tones, he reminded his audience that the nation has made progress when it finds a way to unite in its diversity, rather than to divide the many groups that comprise its population:

Will we respond to the changes of our time with fear, turning inward as a nation, turning against each other as a people? Or will we face the future with confidence in who we are, in what we stand for, in the incredible things that we can do together?¹

This was no mere rhetorical question, as Republican candidates have homogeneously claimed the nation is in crisis and sharp decline, and just as uniformly asserted that virtually every action Obama has taken or proposed for the last seven years was malevolent or worse. In this, the presidential aspirants have behaved no differently than the Republican Congress and Party during this period. Consider, for example:

- Republicans contended that the President's effort to stimulate the economy (mired in the worst recession since World War II when he entered office, with average unemployment at 7.8 percent) with public spending would prove calamitous, as this would only bring ruin amidst untenable deficits and public debt.
- When that effort helped rather than hindered the economy and both the deficit and debt began to improve as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP)—bringing the deficit to 2.5 percent of GDP today—the President's critics did not admit their error, but criticized

him all the more harshly for “wasting” public funds on helping industries avoid bankruptcy, especially the major auto firms, that would “never pay them back.”

- When that initiative, too, succeeded and the nation’s loans to the automotive industry were repaid with interest ahead of schedule, the GOP moved on to contend that Obama’s effort to ensure health insurance access for millions of Americans represented tyranny and “socialism” and would spell the end of excellent medical care in the nation (an argument Republican leaders continue to assert).
- When nothing of the kind occurred, the Party’s leaders turned to suggesting that “climate change” was not real and efforts to address this universal calamity amounted to systemic government overreach that was “killing” millions of jobs—additional assertions for which there was and is no evidence.
- Instead, the country’s historically healthy current accounts deficit and the nation’s overall unemployment rate of 5 percent (the United States is now nearing full employment by many economists’ reckoning) exceed those measures for the Reagan administration—the present GOP’s lodestone for success—and employment growth during the current presidency has outstripped anything achieved under Obama’s predecessor, Republican George W. Bush.

While this list might be extended, it suffices to suggest that the GOP has found it politically expedient systematically to disregard or oppose anything and everything this chief executive might undertake or accomplish and, if current campaign trends are to be believed, its representatives will continue to do so—ever more demagogically and even fascistically—irrespective of whether those claims bear any relationship to what is actually occurring. More, this rhetoric is clearly asserted for its own sake and simply abandoned when proven false, whatever its prior embrace entailed by way of social costs, for a fresh contention, without explanation or apology. These sorts of arguments have typified the GOP approach throughout the Obama presidency, with then Senate Minority leader (now Majority leader) Mitch McConnell (R) of Kentucky stating publicly in an interview and speech in 2010, that the Party would bend every effort and spare nothing to prevent this President from gaining re-election, and failing that, to obstruct his presidency in every feasible fashion.²

It seems clear the Party has held to that aim in a disciplined way, even as it has now paradoxically lost control of its presidential nomination process in its early stages. The result is an unprecedentedly ugly rhetoric and cynicism, at least in recent times, offered by its candidates that is designed to appeal to fearful and uninformed voters in jingoistic and hate-filled ways. The question for democratic governance is what to make of this turn.

One might, as Republican leaders have sought to do, contend that Obama has taken the nation on a path of decline and imminent bankruptcy and that situation justifies their rhetoric and course. But that is simply not so by any objective measure and so may be dismissed, whatever a more balanced critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Obama presidency might suggest.

Alternately, one might argue that the current sharp partisan polarization is not new in American politics, and on that basis suggest the nation will likely muddle through. This view is surely more supportable than the GOP narrative, since we have had demagogues and nativists as a part of our cultural fabric throughout our history. These include such examples as the costly chauvinism that led to the War of 1812 and the Spanish American War, the anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic Know Nothing Party in the 1840s and 1850s, Father Charles Coughlin's anti-Semitic and fascistic rants in the 1930s that attracted millions of listeners weekly, and the travesty of Senator Joseph McCarthy's communist witch-hunt in the 1950s.

While this is certainly true and constitutes an important caution, the current context is quite different. Commentators have lately been debating whether the empirically false picture of the state of the nation painted by Donald Trump, Ted Cruz and other GOP candidates will capture Americans' imagination in the coming election without inquiring deeply into whether it is reasonable or appropriate to offer the nation a "choice" so utterly untethered from reality, however neatly it may play to popular fears or accord with an ideology. I find this oversight quite difficult, as it fails to hold the Republican Party accountable for a long series of depictions of Obama's actions that are baseless. Indeed, GOP rhetoric concerning his initiatives and their implications has often borne no relationship to a reasoned discourse, even as it has demonized the President as an individual and as a leader.

One may debate why the Republican Party has elected to stymie and cast aspersions rather than seek to help govern, but it is evident that it has made that choice and the President bears no responsibility for its candidates' embrace of nativism, bigotry and xenophobia, whatever one may argue

concerning Obama's relative responsibility for addressing the political environment that this Republican choice has created. Nonetheless, the Party's course points to two enduring requirements of democratic governance. First, the GOP and its leaders' decision to work to stonewall the nation's first African-American president and to misinform citizens concerning his aims and accomplishments suggests how important Alexander Hamilton's insight was in *The Federalist Papers* that the Republic must ever maintain leaders who are not simply seeking power and office for their own sake, but genuinely and prudently pursuing the public good. None of today's leading GOP candidates can meet such a test as they deliberately mislead citizens and traffic in fear and the demonization of the President and disadvantaged groups in what has already become a publicly vicious quest for power. The questions on which to reflect, therefore, are how matters came to this pass in one of our major political parties and who is supporting these individuals in their efforts to gain public office and why.

Second, whatever the reasons for the electorate's current unease and fear, and I have treated many of those in recent commentaries, one must nonetheless wrestle with an additional reality of democratic governance illustrated by the excesses of today's leading Republican candidates: a nation cannot long enjoy democracy if its citizenry is insufficiently informed and is willing to scapegoat and demonize shares of the population, on whatever basis. Many of those voters supporting GOP presidential aspirants Trump and Cruz indicate in opinion polls that they believe the President has orchestrated tyranny and allowed immigrants to overrun the country, among other wild claims. They do so clearly unaware of or unwilling to accept the facts (and parroting much of the cant pressed by these and other GOP politicians) related to their concerns and of the President's actual actions. That is, their concerns are often predicated on little more than manipulative and misleading rhetoric. Democracies cannot long survive if large portions of their citizenries do not make reasonably informed choices and are incapable of resisting the siren call of various forms of demagoguery.

In short, today's GOP, characterized as its now dominant stream is by a frenzied hatred of a demonized opponent and "othered" groups, has unleashed very dark forces that potentially threaten not only that Party's future, but also the prospect for continued self-governance in the United States. The demagoguery we now confront as a people is not new to the nation, or fresh to democracy, but it is occurring in a fractionated media environment and during a period of deep electoral restiveness and fear. One

may hope the coming electoral cycle ultimately will reveal the emptiness of the intolerance, mercilessness and venom now on daily display in our country. Nevertheless, that hope must be set against the evident appeal to many of those strident claims and the willingness of one political party's leaders to seize on the forces animating them to secure power. Overall, it is difficult not to conclude that we live in a very ugly time for self-governance, as it is now under popular assault to a degree not witnessed in many years.

(Originally published February 1, 2016)

Notes

¹ Obama, Barack. 2016. "Remarks of President Barack Obama—The State of the Union Address as delivered," The White House, Speeches and Remarks. January 13 (webpage). Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama---prepared-delivery-state-union-address>.

² McConnell, Mitch. 2010. "Our Top Priority: Make Obama a One Term President." Remarks to the Heritage Foundation, November 4 (YouTube video). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-A09a_gHJc.

70 On Anti-Political Correctness Posturing, Human Dignity and Self-Governance

I have been musing about Donald Trump and his supposed “assault” (see below) on political correctness and wondering whether those who applaud his screeds against immigrants, Muslims, individuals with disabilities, women and veterans who have endured torture are missing a vitally important point in understanding their significance for not only the present campaign, but also for our democratic politics and self-governance more generally. I have read any number of accounts of citizens voicing their support for what they take to be Trump’s “refreshing honesty” and “willingness to tell it like it is,” as if expressions of contempt, hatred and bigotry aimed at entire classes of people are appropriate and have heretofore been prevented only by self-censure. I confess I find these sorts of voter comments morally repugnant. At the same time, I have also concluded that whatever ugliness they may represent, they have little or no connection to political correctness.

More bluntly, my sense is that Trump’s contentions, and similar ones offered by other current GOP presidential candidates, are not criticisms of political correctness at all. They instead constitute insidious attacks on the principle of human dignity, and thereby on the fundamentals of democracy. The citizens responding to them may believe that these public statements reflect their attitudes, and perhaps they do. But if so, that fact says more about those individuals’ willingness to embrace hate and smallness than it does about the contours of political correctness, whatever its specific characteristics.

For his part, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Edsall, for example, appears to have been convinced that Trump was criticizing political correctness in his commentary of December 23, 2015, “Trump, Obama and the Assault on Political Correctness.” He observed:

Opposition to political correctness has always been a weapon brandished by the right against what it sees as ‘multicultural liberalism,’ but Trump has taken this to new extremes.

Trump's resounding success with the reckless abandonment of the norms of political discourse suggests that he has tapped into a deep reservoir of antipathy to the culture of polite restraint.¹

Edsall's view has surely been the dominant one among interpretations of Trump's remarks. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the candidate's assertions instead erode the principle of human dignity and equality, without which present-day democratic liberalism cannot be sustained. That tenet was established formally in our time in 1948 with United Nations (and United States) adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Preamble of that charter begins as follows:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.²

Articles 1 and 2 of the Declaration are, if anything, even plainer in their embrace of human dignity, irrespective of specific religious faith or other characteristics:

Article 1.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2.

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether

it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.³

I can see no way to accept this document's principled support of universal human rights, and their clear link to freedom and democratic possibility, and simultaneously to countenance would-be U.S. leaders actively calling for dismissing whole classes of residents and citizens on the basis of their gender, religious faith, disability or any other characteristic. Such stands are not merely appeals for an end to political correctness. To accept the views that Trump, particularly, has asserted, is to argue our nation should set aside the most basic precept of self-governance, the ascription of rights on the basis of human dignity, to adopt a flavor-of-the-month demagoguery in which we become willing collectively to single out a group of individuals for ridicule or hatred based solely on their appearance or disability, war experience, or other attribute as may suit a majority's desire at any given moment. As such, Trump's rhetoric should be regarded as hate speech of a very specific sort that has sought to elicit popular support for the degradation of human freedom.

Perhaps those now celebrating Trump's cruelty and meanness have long secretly wished to discriminate against their fellow citizens and residents, but if so, we need collectively to assert the rights of all against their ignorance. If we do not do so, we shall soon find ourselves depriving one or another group of their basic human rights for the most fatuous of reasons, as Trump has done, and in that process abrogate the rights and freedom of all, for no one would be safe from the demagogic gaze in such an environment.

A democratic people does, in fact, need to learn to practice self-restraint, self-discipline and prudence, if they are to live with heterogeneity and difference and not fall prey to fear and "othering" behaviors. Given that our own nation is among the most diverse on earth, it follows that Americans, especially, should be leery of those who exhort them to excoriate one another.

Political thinkers at least since Aristotle have cautioned democracy's partisans that it can be an extraordinarily difficult regime to maintain, since human beings historically have often and viciously demonstrated their willingness to tyrannize over one another on the basis of real, perceived and sometimes, contrived differences. All the more important, then, that when our polity is confronted with anyone who would tear at the fundamental rights and principles that bind the community, that person be labeled for

what he or she is, rather than be allowed to press divisiveness under the cover of a supposed redress of overreaching “political correctness.” Donald Trump’s demonizing and demeaning rhetoric is profoundly anti-democratic and counter to the human rights that underpin a free polity. It should be labeled the demagoguery that it is.

(Originally published February 15, 2016)

Notes

¹ Edsall, Thomas. 2015. “Trump, Obama and the Assault on Political Correctness,” *The New York Times*, Campaign Stops blog, December 23. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/23/opinion/trump-obama-and-the-assault-on-political-correctness.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fthomas-b-edsall&action=click&contentCollection=opinion®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=5&pgtype=collection&r=0.

² United Nations, 1948. “Preamble,” Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

³ United Nations, 1948. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

71 The Common Good, Today's GOP, Morality and Democratic Politics

The unfolding GOP presidential nominee selection process and its related politics have surely taken some unexpected turns in recent days. But together, these events point to a deeper truth about the character of democratic politics and the perils of the Republican Party's current approach to governance that are worth pondering. I here treat three recent episodes featuring two leading Republican Party presidential nomination seekers and the Senate Majority Leader to illustrate the fact that neither democracy nor democratic politics can long survive when its officeholders forget that it must first and always be morally freighted. This, Abraham Lincoln surely understood as he stood amidst the aftermath of the carnage at Gettysburg and, in now fabled lines, celebrated the moral good the Union represented by observing,

... that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.¹

This, Franklin D. Roosevelt also understood as he rallied the nation in his First Inaugural Address to confront the widespread unemployment, misery and fear created by the Great Depression:

If I read the temper of our people correctly, we now realize as we have never realized before our interdependence on each other; that we cannot merely take but we must give as well; that if we are to go forward, we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline, because without such discipline no progress is made, no leadership becomes effective. We are, I know, ready and willing to submit our lives and property to such discipline, because it makes possible a leadership which aims at a larger good. This I propose to offer, pledging that the larger purposes will bind upon us all as a sacred obligation with a unity of duty hitherto evoked only in time of armed strife.²

Each of these celebrated leaders saw in democratic politics and governance the possibility that only democratic politics and governance can represent, the preservation of freedom and the common good for all of the nation's people, and the compelling need to aspire to that end as a united citizenry bearing the burdens demanded by that shared hope. For both of these statesmen, democratic politics was far more than mobilization strategies and fear mongering, or pandering speeches in a quest for personal power. Instead, it quite literally represented the collective dream of the nation. Democratic politics, in short, was for Lincoln and Roosevelt the vehicle by which a free people's hopes could be articulated, realized and preserved. In this vital sense, democracy, rightly practiced, is inevitably and ineluctably a deeply moral undertaking.

Consider, in sharp contrast to this conception, the following examples from the current GOP nomination race and politics. In recent days, Donald Trump has seen fit to lecture Pope Francis that Trump's disparaging treatment of immigrants and those of the Islamic faith in fact qualifies him as quite "Christian," despite two thousand years of that faith's teaching to the contrary. In particular, Trump defended his promise to have the Mexican government build a wall to prevent 'rapists' from that nation's citizenry from coming to the United States to take American jobs and attack U.S. women. He likewise contended, in those same remarks that, unlike the current occupant of the White House, he would protect the Christian faith from losing its esteemed place in American culture.

As is typical for this candidate, his comments bore little relationship to reality. First, his observations were and are profoundly antithetical to the faith he professes. Second, there is no evidence of either immigrant hordes taking American jobs, to which he often refers, or to any assault on Christianity in this nation. He may lament changing norms and values in the country, but those are not the product of a sustained public attack on Christianity or any other specific faith tradition. Indeed, as much as anything they reflect a thoroughgoing cultural marketization that his career and personae represent. Furthermore, there is no indication of any companion unwillingness to address the same by President Barack Obama. Unlike Lincoln and Roosevelt, or the current Pope for that matter, Trump not only has sought to mislead the American people on these concerns, but to play on their collective restiveness and fear amidst roiling economic and social change and international conflict to gain power. Far from calling for the nation to unite to confront its future challenges, Trump has sought

to divide citizens against one another and to exploit their fears while scapegoating a very weak group, in political terms (immigrants), for concerns for which they are not responsible. That he has apparently done this with malice aforethought deepens the moral travesty that his bombast represents.

If anything, Trump has only sharpened the case against him as a decidedly amoral, if not immoral, and anti-Christian (his often professed belief) actor, by his recent repeated calls for a U.S. return to torture. I will not reiterate here all of the arguments against American use of these heinous practices, but will note that the United States is signatory to a major treaty banning them, that they are antithetical to our Constitution and tradition and that they contravene the most basic tenets of Trump's supposed faith and of democracy. It is difficult to view his remarks concerning torture as anything other than an obvious, ugly and patently cynical attempt to signal to voters that he will be "tough" on terrorism. There are many ways to take such a position without undermining human rights and freedom, but Trump and Senator Ted Cruz, among the remaining GOP nomination seekers, have taken this approach, even as Trump hypocritically invokes God and the greatness of the nation at each campaign stop at which he calls nonetheless for torture.

Perhaps the example that best illustrates how far the current Republican Party contenders and leaders have strayed from an interest in preserving the regime's moral legitimacy and in pursuing the common good, however, is Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's announcement a little more than an hour after news of Associate Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia's death, that he would work to ensure that the Senate would not consider any nominee the President might send forward to replace the justice, as the Constitution requires. Indeed, McConnell went further to suggest that the President not nominate anyone and leave the seat vacant until after the November 2016 election and transition, implying that the post would be open for more than a year. The Majority Leader's declaration and suggestion are obviously partisan and just as clearly counter to the Constitution's requirements. It is unclear whether McConnell can actually make this position reality, as the President has announced his intention to nominate an individual for consideration, which will make it difficult for Senators not to go on record in favor of this transparent ploy to circumvent the Constitution. Whatever else might be said, it is clear that the Senate Majority Leader had nothing more in view than party politics and in retaining his own role as a

leader in taking this stance. Here is how author Alec MacGillis has described the Senator's orientation in a recent insightful analysis:

There was an obvious cost to this approach [to implacably oppose anything President Obama proposed throughout his Presidency]. Withholding any support for President Obama's agenda meant giving up the chance for more policy concessions on big issues like health care and financial reform. But for Mr. McConnell, shaping policy wasn't the goal. Winning was. When he said, notoriously, just before the 2010 election that 'the single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president,' it was less an expression of personal animosity than it was a simple reflection of the permanent campaign ethos.³

In short, each of these examples capture a party and its leaders that, far from demonstrating an interest in the continuing legitimacy and efficacy of the regime they would serve or are serving, instead practice costly, demeaning and divisive politics for the sake of gaining and retaining power at any price. For the three GOP leaders cited, the cost of this orientation has included deliberately misleading voters, sacrificing common claim and governance legitimacy for partisan gain, and adopting positions plainly at odds with human rights and the Constitution. It is hardly news to report that democratic leaders have historically often been tempted to exploit human frailty in the electoral process, but this nation can ill afford one of its primary parties not only embracing a share of its leaders adopting such practices, but going further to institutionalize such aspirations and to practice them with impunity, irrespective of their implications for governance and for their regime.

The current moment in this electoral cycle illustrates afresh the axiom that a free nation cannot endure if its leaders forget that they serve the moral claim of human rights, freedom and the common interests of all of their country's citizens, whatever their partisanship. Our present politics suggests the Republican Party's leaders now run a real risk of forgetting that elemental imperative. The end result of such occurring can only be negative for freedom, and for the Union that Lincoln and Roosevelt so powerfully evoked and served.

(Originally published February 29, 2015)

Notes

¹ Lincoln, Abraham. 1863. The Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln Online, November 19. Available at: <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>.

² Roosevelt, Franklin D. 1933. First Inaugural Address, History Matters, March 4. Available at: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057/>.

³ MacGillis, Alec. 2016. "Why is Mitch McConnell Picking this Fight?" *The New York Times*, February 21. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/21/opinion/sunday/why-is-mitch-mcconnell-picking-this-fight.html?nlid=40087534&src=recpb>.

72 A Descent into Brutish Crudity and Demagoguery

The contest for the Republican presidential nomination has taken several twists in recent days and nearly all of them have been ugly. I discuss three here and then highlight several issues linked to the turn these events represent.

First, in the March 3 debate in Detroit among the four remaining candidates, the discussion descended to the coarsest, most vulgar and brutish in modern presidential electoral history. Spurred by Senator Marco Rubio's decision to meet Donald Trump on his own playground terms (a step applauded by many GOP leaders and media commentators as "long overdue"), the to-and-fro became the equivalent of a school yard "Na-Na Boo-Boo" session, with, unbelievably, time expended on Trump's sexual anatomy. The situation would be laughable, were it not so real. Trump leads his peers in the quest for the Party's nomination, and Rubio apparently decided this tack was necessary to persuade the business executive's partisans that their support was misplaced. Whatever the Senator's intentions, his choice seems ill-suited and ill-timed to do anything other than diminish his standing and degrade the presidential campaign process.

A second development occurred on that same evening, when Trump was forced to acknowledge that his embrace of torture (routinely his biggest applause line at his campaign rallies) would place American troops in the difficult spot of disobeying his orders, were he to be elected president, since torture is illegal under both United States and international law. While he fulminated about the fact that he is a leader and that the armed services would do what he told them to do for that reason—"I'm a leader. I've always been a leader. They're going to do it"—it was plain that his stance was indefensible in principle and in practice.¹ Accordingly, Trump released a written statement the next day suggesting he would follow the law. Nonetheless, in his first public appearances thereafter, Trump began to tell his supporters that the laws related to treatment of prisoners should be "increased" or "broadened" in rhetoric quite reminiscent of that offered by advocates of torture during the George W. Bush administration. Moreover, in terms very similar to a long list of past demagogues, he continued to contend

in a *Face the Nation* broadcast on March 6, that our nation's respect for law, human rights and human dignity was "weak:"

Trump: [W]e've become very weak and ineffective. I think that's why we're not beating ISIS. It's that mentality. ... We cannot beat ISIS. We should beat ISIS very quickly. General Patton would have had ISIS down in about three days. General Douglas MacArthur. We are playing by a different set of rules. ... [T]he ISIS people chop off the heads, and they then go back to their homes and they talk. And they hear we're talking about waterboarding like it's the worst thing in the world, and they've just drowned 100 people and chopped off 50 heads. They must think we are a little bit on the weak side. ... [W]e are playing by rules, but they have no rules. It's very hard to win when that's the case.

[Host] John Dickerson: Isn't that what separates us from the savages?

Trump: No, I don't think so. ... We have to beat the savages.

Dickerson: By being savages?

Trump: No, well. We have to play the game the way they're playing the game. You're not going to win if we're soft and they have no rules. Now, I want to stay within the laws. I want to do all of that, but I think we have to increase the laws because the laws are not working. Obviously, all you have to do is take a look at what's going on. And they're getting worse. They're chopping, chopping, chopping, and we're worried about waterboarding. I just think—I think our priorities are mixed up.²

Significantly, Trump differs imperceptibly from two of his principal rivals, Senators Rubio and Ted Cruz, in taking this stance. Journalists raised the issue of his promise to employ torture in Detroit, not his competitors.

Third, and equally Kafkaesque in its way, when pressed at the March 3 debate concerning whether they would support Trump should he obtain the GOP nomination, all of his remaining rivals indicated they would do so, irrespective of their scathing critiques and expressions of deep concern about him and his suggested (fantasy) policies. The same must be said of the Republican "establishment," that has lately attacked him, including former presidential candidates Mitt Romney and John McCain. Indeed, all but a very few leaders in the Party have refused to say they would not embrace

him were he to gain the GOP nomination. In short, the current Republican candidates, and thus far at least, nearly all other party elites, have agreed they would unite around a fascistic demagogue who has repeatedly lied to the American people, advocated brutish and bizarre policies that could not be implemented in the ways he suggests, and tarnished the office of the presidency by so profoundly coarsening and diminishing the political dialogue in the contest to secure it.

Each of these incidents shares two characteristics: first, they directly and indirectly compromise self-governance and democracy. Second, even were the “policies” Trump advocates to work as posited (which will not occur, since they are unrelated to reality and designed only to play to fearful and angry people by scapegoating and simplistic shibboleths), they would spell the end of freedom as our nation has known it by formally and acutely undermining our commitment to individual human and civil rights. On the first point, Trump appears to be reading his voters well; they are angry and fearful and he is providing them apparently straightforward ways to address their concerns. Unfortunately, the world is hardly so simple as Trump’s rhetoric, and his supporter’s fears have not arisen from President Barack Obama’s alleged weakness, or as a result of “illegal immigrants stealing their jobs,” as the candidate contends. These are scapegoats for the very real challenges that have instead resulted from ongoing economic and social globalization and demographic change, and no amount of blame-casting, will change that fact.

Nor will undermining the legitimacy and capacities of governance, by dubbing them weak and hapless, do anything to address these voters’ genuine concerns. Instead, such steps are likely only to exacerbate Americans’ declining confidence in all of their nation’s institutions. Trump also seems to understand that those voting for him (roughly 34 percent, on average, of his Party’s primary electorate) fear the increasing demographic diversity occurring in this country and lament the fact that “people like them” (they are overwhelmingly white men with high school or less education, with his strongest support coming from the South, Appalachia and parts of the industrial north) will no longer be a majority within it in coming years.³ In such a circumstance and confronting the economic realities unleashed by international competition and globalization, it becomes easy for those supporting Trump to blame immigrants and minorities in the country’s population for their situation. The candidate has surely played to this ugly propensity by routinely disparaging disparate

groups as weak and undeserving, and therefore contemptible. He has lately gone further to demand at his campaign events that those who agree with his positions must “pledge allegiance” to him. This tack of demanding personal loyalty is virtually identical to previous infamous demagogues’ practices, and therefore quite unnerving.

In short, as one might expect of a demagogue, Trump is not addressing the actual challenges confronting those individuals now supporting him, nor does he appear much interested in proposing substantive policies, such as workforce development programs or rethinking tax subsidies for firms engaged in off-shoring employment (although he has offhandedly called for a trade war with (at least) China and Mexico that would likely result in an international trade and financial crisis, were it to occur). Instead, he has encouraged voters to blame the President and various groups (including other nations, e.g., “Mexico is killing us”) for their discomfort with the direction and pace of economic, political and social change. All of this has already led to the degradation of our democratic politics and could, if Trump were to gain the Presidency and behave as he has promised, completely undermine the principles underpinning our regime and international law alike, by systematically depriving citizens of their civil and human rights. It seems obvious that this scenario, should it occur, could readily prove catastrophic for the freedom this nation’s citizens have long enjoyed.

Even assuming Trump does not obtain his Party’s nomination or win the presidential election thereafter; one must still confront the question of what has happened to the Republican Party in recent decades that would permit his ascent. Three of the four remaining GOP candidates have done little in their campaigns except denigrate in abstract terms the government they wish to lead, and all have worked assiduously in their rhetoric to undermine its legitimacy. What is more, the Party’s establishment has long tolerated its legislative leaders’ efforts to prevent the regime from working (governing) so as to blame the chief executive and Democrats for its “failings” in a bid for power that, so far, has been successful. The combination of a descent to crude ugliness in campaign discourse and continuing attacks on governmental legitimacy by members of a Party apparently united by nothing except its thirst for power, constitute an extraordinary challenge to our regime and to self-governance. Sadly, many GOP primary voters are supporting this turn as embodied in Donald Trump’s candidacy, a reminder that democracies are only as strong as the prudence of their electorates.

(Originally published March 14, 2016)

Notes

¹ Davidson, Amy. 2016. "Donald Trump and an Even Cruder G.O.P. Debate," *The New Yorker*, March 4. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/donald-trump-and-an-even-cruder-g-o-p-debate>.

² Allen, Mike, and Daniel Lippman. 2016. "Sunday Best," *Politico Playbook* (website), March 6. Available at: <http://www.politico.com/playbook/2016/03/cruz-trump-squeeze-marco-super-saturday-rubio-invisible-campaign-snl-tapper-march-6-213049>.

³ Thompson, Derek. 2016. "Who are Donald Trump's Supporters, Really?" *The Atlantic*, March 1. Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/who-are-donald-trumps-supporters-really/471714/>.

73 The Road Not Taken

For several years now I have been examining a critical philosophical concern that is integral to the possibility of democracy: creating conditions for the effective exercise of agency or choice by those formally assigned authority to exert it (individuals, directly or indirectly, in democracies), or who seek to attain that status and standing. I have explored this subject in a number of domains, including democratization, international development, community development and post-conflict peacebuilding. Creating and sustaining conditions for the exercise of individual political freedom are innately difficult undertakings. Human societies often wantonly discriminate against members of various groups in their midst and abrogate their rights on all sorts of grounds, including gender, race, religion, ethnicity, tribe and more, and they do so in ways majorities not only countenance, but often consider sacrosanct to how they organize their lives and views of the world.

To this reality one must add the fact that when faced with difficult circumstances, including, historically, economic and fear-inducing trials, humans have repeatedly discovered new bases on which to loathe their neighbors, even those to whom they had previously been closest. I am reminded, for example, of the behavior of Serbs and Croats in the war in their nations during the 1990s, in which thousands of individuals disowned their neighbors of many decades overnight as economic conditions worsened and bloodshed loomed over their communities. This Balkan illustration, and many others, suggest that human beings are capable of the most vicious forms of discrimination and hatred when influenced by norms allowing them so to behave and/or prompted by fears of various sorts.

Yet, the fact that such decisions ultimately turn on human will, and that individuals are not automatons, but live in communities in which they make choices, implies that there is always an indeterminacy about how such decision-making will occur that depends not only on how particular persons behave, but also on how their families, peers and leaders act and react to change and to their decisions. Slobodan Milošević, like many autocrats before and since, deliberately fanned the flames of fear, rage and hatred and promoted social division in the former Yugoslavia to accrue personal power. Those individuals supporting his course embraced the worst forms of depravity imaginable as they backed his ugly rise and rule. Nonetheless,

it is important to emphasize that these were *choices*, and there was no special reason *a priori* to suppose that those who took them would adopt the heinous course so many Serbs did. There are always many ways one may choose to address changing circumstances and concerns, and none are pre-ordained. When individuals possess agency, they may adopt the path they wish, and do so for reasons, well or poorly considered or justified, they elect.

All of this comes to mind as Donald Trump continues to lead in his quest to gain the Republican presidential nomination this year, and daily offers a horrific amalgam of violence, hatred and empty narcissism as the proposed antidote to his supporters' very real sense that their party's past choices have too often robbed them of genuine agency and economic possibility. That frustration and existential angst have found those voters willing to undo democracy and freedom itself, and to support, apparently unequivocally, a completely unprepared and unqualified individual who daily preaches a bigotry that does little other than tear at the sinews that bind the nation as nation.

All of this is well known, but I find myself musing on it afresh, and not only because it represents a crisis of our politics. I recently read a book by Cornell University professor David Orr examining Robert Frost's century-old iconic poem, "The Road Not Taken."¹ Like millions of Americans of my generation, I read and analyzed a substantial share of Frost's oeuvre in high school and college. I also recall seeing him read when I was a small child as my family gathered before our black-and-white television set to watch the inauguration of President John Kennedy. Kennedy, shortly after his election in 1960, had invited the fabled New Englander to participate in that event, and the poet did so in a now legendary way.

Orr recounts that many people today read "The Road Not Taken," which contains only 20 lines despite its continuing resonance, as an evocation of American individualism and capacity to exercise personal agency. That apparently dominant interpretation surprised me, as I have never read the poem that way. But I can see how such a view could become so widely adopted that it now appears commonly in our popular culture and is often commemorated and celebrated on coffee mugs, calendars and in television shows.

Nonetheless, Orr concludes that the power of the poem does not rest in its supposed celebration of individual agency, but instead in its evocation of the indeterminacy of its exercise. As Frost observed:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.²

Orr's interpretation has it just right, I think, as the traveler in the poem can no more return to his or her original state, once having selected a course, than you or I could. Like the individual in Frost's poem, we are always changed by the implications of the decisions and paths on which we settle and by the forces that play roles in leading/shaping us toward them, sometimes to an unexpectedly profound degree. If this is so for individuals, it suggests that the Republican Party and our nation, too, likely will be changed significantly should the GOP actually nominate and legitimize Trump as its standard bearer. While we cannot know if such will occur, as I write, we can be sure of what sort of individual this businessman is, and we can say definitively that his brand of politics is both supremely anti-democratic and authoritarian. We can also say that those supporting him appear to be so angry about their present state, for whatever complex array of reasons, that they have repeatedly demonstrated their willingness to jettison the principles of human rights and freedom on which the country is founded. For his part, and like so many demagogues before him, Trump has shown himself willing to play to that resentment and its associated fears, and to exploit social divisions to acquire power. As I have remarked in previous commentaries, if this is a classic scenario for the emergence of democratic tyranny, its occurrence is no less dismal for that fact.

Indeed, as Frost's poem highlights for the traveler, while the exact implications of the willingness of these citizens to accept a narcissist's empty claims, xenophobia, nationalism and racism as salve for their perceived woes cannot be known now, they will surely be consequential for our governance and institutions, whether their favorite is ultimately selected or turned aside by their party and nation. That is, while we cannot know with certainty just what will follow from the turn in our politics that Trump's rise represents, it appears very likely that we will collectively continue as a nation to suffer the consequences of some among us choosing to support his brand of demagoguery.

James Madison, among the most brilliant of our country's remarkable Founders, spent virtually his entire career exploring the central question of how to preserve democratic possibility against the vicissitudes of human

capacity for evil, self-absorption and rationalization. It seems fair to say that he was more than ingenious in devising ways to secure the former against the likelihood of continuing assaults by the latter. We have now entered a time when many Americans appear willing to discard even the strongest of Madison's defenses to support a demagogue out of a combination of economic insecurity and dread of possibly diminished social standing. As America's fourth president surely knew, such bulwarks are always breached when freedom is lost, and the choice, in retrospect, is always a poor one. That fact rarely prevents the purveyor from destroying the proverbial wall, however.

Frost was doubtless correct that we cannot always know when we make choices what their consequences may be for ourselves and for the many others we do not realize will be affected by our decisions. But those choices will be real, and in the present case, as a major political party flirts with nominating a xenophobe, they look set to do great and enduring harm not only to our nation's democratic institutions, but also more deeply and tellingly to the culture that must sustain them. The great irony of our present situation is that so many Americans appear willing voluntarily to give up their hard-won democratic agency by employing it to undermine its genuine future exercise.

(Originally published March 28, 2016)

Notes

¹ Orr, David. 2015. *The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.

² Frost, Robert. 1992. *Selected Poems*. New York, NY: Gramercy Books/Random House, p.163.

74 On Three Ways of Looking at a Political Phenomenon

One of my favorite poems by Wallace Stevens is his “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”¹ One way to read the following stanza from the poem is to argue that it suggests one person’s relation to life and the landscape in which she is immersed:

The river is moving.

The blackbird must be flying.

It was evening all afternoon.

It was snowing

And it was going to snow.

The blackbird sat

In the cedar limbs.

I have found myself thinking of Stevens’ poem as I have considered the various ways in which analysts are seeking to make sense of why those who vote for Donald Trump in GOP primaries and caucuses are doing so this election season. Perhaps in quiet homage to Stevens, I seek here only to understand ways of viewing this phenomenon, without pretending that any may be definitive. In fact, they stand in relation to one another as the protagonist in the poem relates to her landscape and way of knowing it.

This said, one may describe at least three primary ways observers have explained why so many GOP primary voters have been willing to support so manifestly unqualified an individual as their preferred nominee for this year’s presidential contest. I have previously argued, with others, that Trump’s voters are often in decidedly difficult economic straits. Indeed, many are from areas experiencing economic decline, arising in part at least, from the globalization of trade that has occurred in recent decades and the decline in manufacturing in the United States. Many of these voters have watched as their communities have continued to deteriorate and their own earnings

have stagnated or worse as those processes have unfolded. It is easy to imagine how living in such conditions could breed unease, anxiety and anger.

And many of these voters exhibit exactly such tendencies. They want explanations for why they are apparently locked in situations of deepening disquietude, and they worry that their Party's leaders' devotion to the tenets of neoliberalism will both continue to worsen their economic situations and also undermine the social programs on which many in this group depend. Trump has provided simple bromides for their apprehensions: He has told them he will replace "stupid" leaders, send "job-leaching" immigrants home and more generally deal with a vaguely impugned "other" that has "taken" the way of life of these individuals from them. Beyond these steps, he has reassured them that he will not seek to undo government-provided social insurance or health or disability support, a stance his principal competitor has actively impugned as not genuinely "conservative."

In this view, too, these voters' angst has only deepened as a result of the pace of social change. Many of Trump's supporters reside in rural areas and small communities and are threatened by the rapid shift they see occurring in norms and values in the majority population around them. These disproportionately older and less well-educated white men see their social status eroding as the country's Hispanic/Latino population grows and African Americans have achieved unprecedented and highly salient successes in business, politics, entertainment and sport. In short, this argument suggests these voters have become ever more apprehensive as they have witnessed changing mores challenge their long-held understandings, and not simply elsewhere, but in their own towns and neighborhoods. In this view, the twin forces of neoliberal policies coupled with globalization (which proponents of neoliberalism have strongly supported) and their combined enduring impacts on wages as well as the swift pace of social change have created a cadre of uneasy GOP voters. These citizens intensely resent their personal situations and continue to hold social values often publicly embraced by their Party's elites, but these individuals no longer believe that those leaders are making any effort to help them or to secure those values. Trump has promised them better treatment while giving them easy targets to blame for their woes.

This explanation for why these voters have embraced a jingoistic nativist as their preferred Party leader has the singular advantage, in my view at least, of dignifying those whose behavior it seeks to explain. That is not the case for a share of GOP opinion leaders in the neoconservative wing

of the Party, who have chosen to heap disdain on Trump's white working-class supporters. Their views have appeared in the conservative biweekly, *The National Review*, and they reflect the long-dominant view of the working class and poor among many Party principals that such individuals are most often the architects of their own misery and deserving of little but contempt.

Here are two examples of reporting in the magazine in recent weeks in which authors have visited the communities populated by Trump supporters and provided their assessments. The first piece, by Kevin Williamson, "The Father Führer," concluded the following about the residents of what he termed the broken family, welfare dependent and drug-and-alcohol-addicted "downscale communities" he visited:

Nothing happened to them. There wasn't some awful disaster. There wasn't a war or a famine or an occupation. ... The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible. The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles.²

A short while later, *The Review* published an article with a similar argument by David French,

Simply put, [white working class] Americans are killing themselves and destroying their families at an alarming rate. No one is making them do it. The economy isn't putting a bottle in their hand. Immigrants aren't making them cheat on their wives or snort OxyContin.³

In short, in this view, Trump's voters are discontented and fearful because they are contemptible individuals who are ruining their lives and families rather than moving to another location where they could begin anew in a place where real opportunity exists. This trope is hardly new in the GOP; President Ronald Reagan's first budget director, David Stockman, was fond of offering an identical argument in 1981-1982 in response to complaints from those living in localities hurt by that administration's sweeping budget cuts in many social programs. Moreover, it is surely direct in its explanation of why Trump voters find themselves in the difficulties they do: According to those who voice this view, these citizens are good-for-nothings and their communities now serve no worthwhile economic or social role. They should

move from those “dark holes of misery,” and soon, if they wish to demonstrate to themselves and to the world they are not simply ne’er-do-wells. The fact that this perspective continues to animate many Party elites provides one explanation for why those voting for Trump would evidence the peevishness they do with GOP candidates espousing such views.

A third viewpoint on why Trump has gained the support he has attained has come from a share of this nation’s political scientists striving to understand the businessman’s allure. These analysts have pointed to the rather shocking growth among these voters of a willingness to support authoritarianism, a propensity to desire order and to fear outsiders. A Ph.D. student at the University of Massachusetts, Matthew MacWilliams, has polled a large sample of voters and found that Trump’s supporters correlate closely with views that align with authoritarianism.⁴ Likewise, Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler have argued in a thoughtful book based on national survey data that the ongoing polarization in American politics is fueled by a large electoral group comprised of Americans with authoritarian tendencies, and those individuals have disproportionately supported the Republican Party.⁵ These studies’ disquieting findings suggest that many Americans cannot address personal and social changes without falling prey to exaggerated fears, and that those feelings have made them pine for a strong leader who can assuage their concerns, whatever their source, with force. The implication of this trend for self-governance is obvious and alarming.

All three of these explanations point to two salient factors that merit further exploration. First, America’s leaders, Republican and Democratic alike, have long supported free trade on the view that more citizens would benefit than lose by such a stance in the long run. But in the short-term, many Americans and their communities have lost in the globalization sweepstakes, and one political Party, the GOP, has adopted strategies that have worked doggedly to require that those populations cope with their changed circumstances virtually alone, and also declared them lazy dissolutes who could “fix” their woes themselves if they would but try. The irony in this situation would make O. Henry proud. Second, the trend among so many Americans toward a long-term flirtation with authoritarianism should give leaders in both of our major political parties pause. The current combination of unalloyed fears in a restive body politic coupled with many citizens open to “one who can set matters right” with force should prompt these leaders to re-examine their priorities. Steps to enact policies to ensure

self-governance rather than realize abstract ideological claims ought soon to guide this period of overdue introspection.

(Originally published April 11, 2016)

Notes

¹ Stevens, Wallace. 1982. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 92-95 at 94-95.

² Williamson, Kevin. 2016. "The Father-Fuhrer," *The National Review*, March 28. Available at: <https://www.nationalreview.com/nrd/articles/432569/father-f-hrer>.

³ French, David. 2016. "Working Class Whites have Moral Responsibilities—In Defense of Kevin Williamson," *The National Review*, March 14. Available at: <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/433060/white-working-class-debate-facts-can-be-nasty>.

⁴ MacWilliams, Matthew. 2016. "The Best Predictor of Trump's Support isn't income, education or age. It's authoritarianism." *Vox*, February 23. Available at: <http://www.vox.com/2016/2/23/11099644/trump-support-authoritarianism>.

⁵ Hetherington, Marc, and Jonathan Weiler. 2009. *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

75 On Frame Ambiguity and Democratic Politics

In a recent commentary, I noted that I had recently read David Orr's book analyzing the enduring power of Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken."¹ Orr was particularly fascinated by the levels of ambiguity present in the poem. I have been considering ambiguity, too, since reading his volume, although in my case, I have been pondering its themes in relationship to our nation's present democratic politics. As in "The Road Not Taken" and its reflections on the indistinctness of life and choice-making, the question of democratic decision-making in the U.S. today appears suffused with unforeseen and unforeseeable turns and consequences. It seems to me a major share of this is so inherently, but our peculiar cultural characteristics and our current economic moment have heightened the importance of this inbuilt challenge to self-governance. I here consider a number of ways in which ambiguity is built into our regime foundations, and then use those considerations to highlight several key concerns that make widespread understanding and acceptance of those broad realities difficult in our current political firmament. That fact has important portent for the character of our present national politics.

Perhaps most basically, democracy empowers "the common person" with responsibility to make choices to ensure their individual and collective freedom. This supposes that individuals possess capacity to make such choices (a matter of lively philosophical and scientific debate as I write), and that they will make such decisions with probity and an eye to more than their current whims or perceived interests, or worse. Famously, democracy presupposes the possibility of human agency and deliberation. That is, even if individuals can act with volition, they must do so not only on the basis of their needs or emotions of the moment, but also with a clear view of the requirements of others in their polity, and with prudence. All of these attributes must be more or less robustly realized if freedom is to be preserved, and none is assured in a context that rests finally on individuals making political choices. The subjects of whether such is possible on a long-term basis, and how precisely to ensure such results in any case, have been a matter of debate for centuries. The democratic firmament is an innately ambiguous one.

If this is so for the political foundational aspirations of our regime, that condition is only aggravated by the fact that we have sought as a polity to embrace both self-government and capitalism, and we are deeply confused collectively concerning which of these is or should be architectonic. As for the first point, democracy calls for the political pursuit of equality even as capitalism, left to its actors' devices, furiously creates wealth inequalities in society. This innate tension is exacerbated in our political-economy because we have never settled on a singular view of equality and what it might mean for the remarkable heterogeneity of our nation's population. In short, our collective embrace of a politics aimed foremost at individual freedom and equality is in tension with our desire for the goods that capitalism efficiently provides, as the latter innately produces inequalities that have portent for the political agency of those living in our society. The outcome is a complex mosaic of economic, social and political tensions that are ever in play and that typically go unresolved, at least in anything like a definitive way. The result is a democratic politics of contested claims and core value ambiguities.

All of this is made more difficult still by our nation's embrace, for at least four decades, of a neoliberal public philosophy whose proponents suggest that politics should serve the market (read capitalism) and not vice versa. This stance is more than problematic, as the market has neither legitimacy nor means to govern, nor does it set the conditions under which it may function. Assigning the market this role may also permit capitalist actors an unduly determinative role in political decision making for which they have no special province and even less accountability. That fact harbors the potential to undermine democratic possibility, while also deepening political and economic inequality in society. The result of this enduring situation is not only a politics of fearfulness amidst the roil and uncertainties of globalization, but also one of fierce and fear-filled competition among the nation's states and localities for any and all economic activity. That condition only provides additional leverage for market actors to exercise political power and influence, which can complicate and worsen an already difficult scenario.

Neoliberalism has also brought with it a vigorous and ultimately corrosive anti-governmentalism that some individuals have fetishized into a rigid ideology that imagines the innate messiness of democratic politics is fundamentally unnecessary, or worse, is evil; with this orientation has come an unwillingness (and often, inability) to act collectively that now pervades our national politics. It is surely a fundamental reason, for example, for why

so rich a country continues to allow its public infrastructure to deteriorate at an alarming rate. Convincing the masses that public goods can be provided by firms, apart from vigorous and regulative government action, is a fiction, amply demonstrated by decades of evidence. The market cannot govern or ensure the rights of all citizens, nor should it be expected to do so. Its actors will provide those items from which they may profit, neither more nor less, and nothing further should be expected of them. Firms will act when they can make profits, and even if one supposes that government can harness their capacities in ways that guarantee profits while also producing public goods at a reasonable cost, their capacities are never aimed at governing (and one might argue they should not be), but at specific goods or service provision, with the ultimate aim of providing returns to their owners.

This brief discussion suggests that we are a country now founded on conflicting principles whose meanings we continue to contest, but that we have collectively charged ourselves and our political institutions with securing. There is ambiguity aplenty in that ambition—both in what we may undertake jointly and why and how—and that situation is made still more opaque by the fact that we have decided we should pursue our national aims via a federalist distribution of power and authority. To that situation, however, we (as a nation) have elected to add another level of complexity and increasingly, of confusion, to marry a democratic governance structure and aspirations with a capitalistic economy. Many in our society, at least rhetorically, have gone further to advocate that the market can and should displace politics altogether, as they have imagined that governments do little besides harm citizen interests while markets provide economic goods and growth. The second is to be much preferred in this calculus to the former, which deals with the vexing issues of assuring individuals' dignity and rights and freedom amidst the enduring reality of humans' propensity to undermine these.

Taken together, these conditions have created a political context for which the following descriptors appear appropriate:

- A population beset by the continuing “creative destruction” of globalized capitalist market dynamics, a share of whom are arguing fervently that those citizens displaced by those forces are alone responsible for their fates
- A citizenry with less and less faith in its collective capacities to create, sustain and manage public goods effectively and equitably

- A portion of the population willing to accept demagogic claims and scapegoats as a consequence of their ire concerning their treatment by political elites of their political party and fearfulness about their personal economic situations
- A polity whose self-imposed confusion about how its political and economic institutions should relate has convinced many of its citizens that only capitalist entities should matter, and that political values and institutions should do whatever is necessary to support those organizations, according them a status well above the regime and the principles it serves.
- A citizenry whose confusion concerning how to marry capitalism and democracy has wrought a significant, bitter and rigid political movement that decries at every turn the complex political and institutional governance politics its own conflicted and errant values have wrought.

In sum, we have a citizenry facing an increasingly complex self-governance challenge while being persistently told by a share of its political elites that it need not confront that situation head-on, but may sidestep it by refusing to govern in favor of an alternative that does not exist. To this we must add the fear and anger wrought by swift social and economic change, and the fact that one political party has elected to adopt an ideology that blames those individuals displaced by global economic turbulence for their situations. These conditions would appear to support exactly what we have seen in this year's nomination politics: one party's primary candidates offering empty policy prescriptions based on demagogic and ideological fury, while one of the other party's principal candidates rails against inequality while relying on the thin reeds of anger and a narrow and fast winnowing belief in self-governance as the levers for attainment of his prescription for wholesale change. Oddly, none of these presidential aspirants, it seems, is asking citizens to assume their rightful roles in self-governance or in defining freedom in ways that demand that outcome. Since that is so, it is difficult to see how Americans, whatever their partisanship or ideological preference, can be brought realistically and prudently to address the realities of their governance responsibilities any time soon.

(Originally published April 25, 2016)

Notes

- ¹ Orr, David. 2015. *The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.

76 Democratic Mobilization, Deliberation and Civic Health

At its best, democratic politics should be a continuing dialogue among citizens and their leaders (and would-be leaders) concerning the appropriate direction and steps necessary for the collective furtherance of their freedom and welfare. At its worst, that forum can descend into demagoguery and active efforts to deprive citizens of their rights. Such situations threaten freedom itself. And the mediating factors determining whether a democratic regime can move closer to an ideal or fall into degraded discourses that actively undermine civil rights and freedom, appear to be how deliberately the citizenry behaves collectively, the beliefs (ideologies) and integrity of responsible officials and the forms those individuals employ to share their perspectives with voters. None of these factors is new. Indeed, the character of all of these is elemental to the creation and maintenance of self-governing institutions.

I have lately been struck by a series of news accounts that together reveal the nation is now evidencing major difficulties with each of these critical components of self-rule. The result has been a presidential election season replete with leading candidates offering deliberate lies as their supposed “platforms;” appeals to the worst tendencies in the voting public, including invocations of racism and jingoism; evidence of widespread ignorance among large shares of the electorate; and a quest for power for its own sake among some would-be leaders, irrespective of the implications of their actions for the health of the body politic. A few examples from those stories may help to illustrate these tendencies.

The first account that caught my attention concerned Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe (D), who recently issued an executive order restoring the voting rights of more than 200,000 ex-offenders in his state. It is easy to defend his actions as appropriate in principle, since these individuals had served their sentences for their crimes and returned to the general population. One either takes seriously the fact that they had undergone what the Commonwealth had declared appropriate punishment and now should be treated as any other citizen, or one risks treating whole cadres of Americans (also Virginians, in this case) as undeserving of their innate rights, no matter what price they may have paid society to compensate

for their past behavior. Nevertheless, as Leonard Pitts pointed out in his nationally syndicated column, if McAuliffe enjoys the high ground in this situation, there is little doubt that the chief executive's timing was carefully considered. A majority of those who will now be able to vote are African Americans, and while many will not exercise their new-found franchise, those who do are likely to vote for the Democratic standard-bearer in November. Virginia General Assembly speaker Dennis Howell (R),

pronounced himself 'stunned,' by the governor's action which he said was designed to deliver November votes to presumed Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. 'It is hard to describe how transparent the governor's motives are. ... The singular purpose of Terry McAuliffe's governorship is to elect Hillary Clinton President of the United States.'¹

However silly this hyperbole might seem in light of the reality of the likely marginal actual electoral consequences of McAuliffe's action, it demonstrates how threatening the governor's step appears to a party that realizes its majority may be in jeopardy, as Virginia's demographics continue to shift away from the GOP's traditional base. Nonetheless, it also seems unlikely that McAuliffe took his bold step solely as an act of principle. As Pitts concluded, "This is no profile in courage. This is an act of political expedience. ... You cannot applaud without holding your nose."² Ultimately, this episode is more interesting for what it reveals about the Republican legislative majority in Virginia than it is for the complex motives that may have underpinned the governor's action.

Meanwhile, a second recent news story reported that the GOP continues to demonstrate its willingness to manipulate voter registration and identification requirements in states where it enjoys a legislative majority on the basis of patently false posturing that onerous registration conditions are necessary to avoid widespread voter fraud.³ Kansas is the latest case in point: More than 22,000 voters who sought to register in February remain in a kind of legal limbo as the state "assesses" their credibility as citizens. Kansas Republican leaders have insisted on ensuring exceptionally difficult registration requirements for these individuals, knowing that nearly 60 percent of them are young (18-29) and, on average, less likely to vote for the GOP in November. Since Kansas has successfully prosecuted only one instance of actual voter registration fraud in the last nine months, despite

Republican arguments that deceit is rampant, it seems difficult to defend this stance as anything but a bald act of power to deny individuals their vote because those in positions of authority fear they might not support their party. This situation speaks for itself in its implications for democracy and civil rights, as does the fact that the Republican Party has employed this tactic in multiple states, in addition to Kansas.

That the GOP can embrace an outright fabrication such as the position its leaders have adopted concerning vote fraud in Kansas, despite the facts, suggests that those officials are confident they can play on voter attitudes and fears for support if they can frame the public conversation successfully. In fact, as noted, the GOP has unleashed a barrage of “concern” about voter registration fraud in Kansas. This reality points up the role of appeals to citizens’ ignorance and prejudices and the ability to do so via canalized channels that reinforce the beliefs of those already inclined to take specific positions. So, it is that the GOP implies that the young people who have registered to vote in Kansas are somehow not “really” eligible to do so because they may lack one or another form of identification demanded. Implicitly that stance also suggests that those thousands of would-be voters are trying deliberately to mislead the state, a stance for which there is no empirical evidence, but one that is surely emotionally inflammatory for other voters.

Likewise, the Republican Party has argued, again without offering any principle to support its claim, that those who have otherwise paid retribution for their crimes by serving their sentences nevertheless do not merit being treated as citizens. In so doing, those leaders have laid aside the tenet of punishment followed by reconciliation in favor of appeals to citizen prejudice and fears. Howell’s comments in response to McAuliffe’s action underscored this conclusion. The Speaker highlighted what he took to be the implications of the governor’s actions for his party’s electoral calculus (and that of the Democrats, to be sure) rather than offer an in-principle contention for his position that these individuals should continue to be denied their civil rights. In truth, he has never offered such an argument. Nevertheless, by appealing to fear and prejudice of “criminals” as well as whipping up partisan outrage, Howell was surely reinforcing the views of members of his party and giving them reasons to be angry about this alleged assault on their birthright. In this sense, his remarks were thoughtfully calculated to undermine deliberation, rather than to encourage it among voters. It appears that like Kansas’ GOP leaders, Howell was most interested in securing/maintaining

political power for himself and his party and was more than willing to press intentionally misleading claims and exploit voter prejudices to do so.

The third news account I noticed concerned President Obama, who recently undertook an extended interview concerning his economic legacy with *New York Times* correspondent Andrew Sorkin.⁴ One question Sorkin asked was why so many Americans were so uninformed about the state of the nation's economy and the President offered an empirically accurate and frank assessment:

He quickly returned to the topic of public perception. 'If you ask the average person on the streets, "Have deficits gone down or up under Obama?" probably 70 percent would say they've gone up,' Obama said, with some justifiable exasperation—the deficit has in fact declined (by roughly three-quarters) since he took office, and polls do show that a large majority of Americans believe the opposite. Obama is animated by a sense that, looking at the world around him, the U.S. economy is in much better shape than the public appreciates, especially when measured against the depths of the financial crisis and the possibility—now rarely even considered—that things could have been much, much worse. Over a series of conversations in the Oval Office, on Air Force One and in Florida, Obama analyzed, sometimes with startling frankness, nearly every element of his economic agenda since he came into office. His economy has certainly come further than most people recognize. The private sector has added jobs for 73 consecutive months—some 14.4 million new jobs in all—the longest period of sustained job growth on record. Unemployment, which peaked at 10 percent the year Obama took office, the highest it had been since 1983, under Ronald Reagan, is now 5 percent, lower than when Reagan left office. The budget deficit has fallen by roughly \$1 trillion during his two terms. And overall U.S. economic growth has significantly outpaced that of every other advanced nation.⁵

The interview suggested that the broad public ignorance of these facts has most frustrated the President. Obama acknowledged the swathe of Americans who have left the labor force completely and highlighted, too, those he has sought to assist who have not benefited from the sustained economic recovery that has occurred during his tenure. But, he also noted

that his efforts to aid those displaced by globalization and its depressive effects on wages have been routinely stymied by unbridled GOP opposition. Overall:

‘How people feel about the economy,’ Obama told me, giving one part of his own theory, is influenced by ‘what they hear.’ He went on: ‘And if you have a political party –in this case, the Republicans–that denies any progress and is constantly channeling to their base, which is sizable, say, 40 percent of the population, that things are terrible all the time, then people will start absorbing that.’⁶

Taken together, these three recent news accounts highlight several longer-term trends in our politics that are disconcerting for our nation’s ability to engage in anything resembling prudential democratic politics:

- Widespread public ignorance of what is occurring in the nation’s politics, both as a result of increasingly narrow and partisan communications outlets, and deliberate and elaborate attempts to mislead and obscure those facts in the name of securing power for one or another political party;
- The ill effects of the Republican Party’s absolutist anti-government ideology and embrace of a form of economic thinking that does not support deliberative or prudent government management of the nation’s economy;
- The impact for the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of citizens of the GOP’s ideology-driven refusal to assist those displaced by globalization—including many of that Party’s supporters—but a willingness, instead, to blame them personally for the conditions they confront;
- An apparently growing inclination among some party officials to deny Americans their civil rights if doing so will obtain sufficient support to allow them to gain or maintain power.

The implications of a continuation and deepening of these trends, for self-governance and freedom, should such occur, are clear and imply a possible descent into demagoguery or worse, as those seeking power become ever more adroit at manipulating a public often unaware of the realities they confront. Alternatively, the citizenry could rebel against exploitation by elites

seeking power and wealth, and demand electoral and campaign finance reforms as well as different forms of information so as to avoid the condition in which many now find themselves. While I sketch these possibilities, there are surely many others that would prevent the wholesale temporary or permanent usurpation of self-governance. Some options might find the electorate choosing to reject the dominant neoliberal public philosophy that has hollowed out the country's public institutions for several decades and deeply eroded their popular legitimacy. Such a turn might prove the most salutary of all.

(Originally published May 9, 2016)

Notes

¹ Pitts, Leonard. 2016. "McAuliffe does Right thing for Wrong Reason," *The Miami Herald*, April 28. Available at: <http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/leonard-pitts-jr/article74099102.html>.

² Pitts, "McAuliffe does Right thing."

³ Editorial board. 2016. "Voting Gets Harder in Kansas," *The New York Times*, April 30. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/01/opinion/sunday/voting-gets-harder-in-kansas.html>.

⁴ Sorkin, Andrew. 2016. "President Obama Weighs his Economic Legacy," *The New York Times*, April 28. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/01/magazine/president-obama-weighs-his-economic-legacy.html>.

⁵ Sorkin, "President Obama Weighs Legacy."

⁶ Sorkin, "President Obama Weighs Legacy."

77 Homo Faber: The Triumph and Perils of Narcissistic Politics

These last two weeks of the Republican Presidential nomination race have been eventful, as they have seen Donald Trump accumulate enough delegates for most pundits and the Chair of that Party, Reince Priebus, to declare him its likely nominee. Indeed, Trump's delegate total is adequate to have prompted his two remaining rivals to depart the contest, leaving him the proverbial last candidate standing. And so it now appears that the Republican Party candidate for president this year will be a demagogic, nativist, race-baiting narcissist who has promised his followers little more than that he is smarter than everyone else and can will the outcomes he declaims. Trump's success has many in his party more than angry and concerned for the GOP's electoral fortunes in the fall, and some have refused to embrace him as the inevitable nominee.

That list includes former Presidents H. W. and George W. Bush as well as House of Representatives Speaker Paul Ryan. Former Massachusetts Governor and GOP standard-bearer Mitt Romney has also not endorsed Trump. But many of the real estate businessman's former rivals have done so, including Ben Carson and Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey and former Governor Rick Perry of Texas. Other Republican leaders have lined up to lend him their support as well, including, perhaps most notably, Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. These individuals apparently have no difficulty embracing so anti-democratic a figure in the name of party "unity" to secure a victory (power) in the fall. Given that Trump continues to make the same essential arguments he has made since the start of his campaign, one must accept that these officials are willing to take their chances and dance with a demagogue if it means they can gain or retain political power.

Meanwhile, during this same period I have read countless stories and opinion pieces warning journalists not to "normalize" Trump and treat him in the same manner as the yet to be determined Democratic Party nominee (neither of those candidates have engaged in a race-baiting and nativist campaign, nor stooped to playground rhetoric to belittle their rivals as Trump has routinely done). Nor, on the evidence at least, has either Democrat deliberately lied repeatedly by repudiating statements made

previously on the record, leaving supporters to decide what to make of so blatant a disregard for truth, as again, Trump has done. Perhaps the most important argument for not “normalizing” Trump is his patent and prideful ignorance and his lack of relevant experience for the presidency. The eminent physicist Jeremy Bernstein, for example, recently examined Trump’s comments on nuclear policy and declared him a “colossus of ignorance” on that vital concern.¹

Other experts on fiscal and monetary policy, trade policy and immigration, among other topics, have similarly declared Trump’s version of reality to be both fanciful and dangerous. Nevertheless, his supporters have handed him an improbable victory and apparently see his constant evocations of superior will and intellect as sufficient to whisk away all of their fears, trials and travails. These individuals appear to take Trump at his word that he will attain his often outrageous claims by sheer force of his “smarter than everyone else” boasting. It is all deeply unsettling, frightening and sad for the devotee of freedom and democratic governance, but perhaps to be expected in light of at least a share of modern philosophic tenets and our nation’s dominant public philosophy. What follows is a brief reflection on how these set the stage for this apparent triumph by a demagogue—for his likely victory has not changed what he is or how he attained that turn—irrespective of how many GOP officials now decide to support him in the name of power.

Prior to the 17th century certainly, as Hannah Arendt has observed, philosophers saw human thought as a direct way to consider and attain the truth of situations and concerns. Knowledge was thus the handmaiden of contemplation, as philosophy was then seen as the servant of theology. Certainly since Francis Bacon argued in the early 1600s that knowledge was power, however, Western civilization has moved ever more fully toward the position that thought is, and should be, the agent of doing and not to be undertaken for its own sake.² Nonetheless, despite our broad approval of this stance as a population today, when knowledge serves production it cannot also serve as a guide or restraint on that “making.” Instead, the apparently useful bends knowledge to its will as it becomes the lone rationale for contemplation. This strained logic is far advanced in American universities today, for example, where the only legitimate form of knowledge is fast being defined as that which can be instrumentalized, commodified and made imminently “productive.”

Today, students are told by friends and family and the media to eschew classes and disciplines that are perceived, incorrectly, as not being

immediately useful, and state governors almost daily issue demands for more “job ready” curricula and propose not allowing students who enroll in “unproductive” majors to assume loans to help defray the costs of their education. There is, in principle, no end to the demands on knowledge that can (and in this view, must) occur in the name of the instrumental or of production, just as there is, in principle, no arbiter available to discipline such claims. They may become as limitless as human will can make them. This situation can become dangerous for democratic politics, when citizen desires linked to production and utility devolve into arbitrary willing. That is, this understanding allows individuals to require that knowledge “produce” certain outcomes, irrespective of whether those demands bear any relationship to reality.

If all of this sounds familiar, it should, as it is a near perfect representation of current GOP nomination politics. Donald Trump has presented himself and his personal will as sufficient to bring the world’s complexities, pain and woe to heel, suggesting to voters that he alone is capable of controlling and overcoming all of the challenges now confronting them. According to Trump, he will shape nations, economies, events and all else to his will because he says he can. Trump’s voters want security, and the narcissist has promised it to gain the approbation he requires. Each actor in this play obtains what they need as both embrace the supposed promise of the unfettered will’s power to control knowledge to “produce” change. In a Faustian bargain, voters hand off the hard challenges, and their power, to an individual arguing that all knowledge will hew to his will. In so doing, citizens give that person the status he craves. With the redefinition of knowledge as instrument of a will’s production, nothing remains to prevent a fearful and undisciplined population from absolving itself of responsibility for its own freedom and governance and giving those rights to a proponent of his own unfettered desires. Thus, it is that a demagogue can come to popular approval in his Party, and thus it is that GOP leaders must decide whether to sanction this outrage or accept it. It now appears that for many of those officials, the latter will obtain.

Even at this stage in the evolution of political thought in modern life, our nation’s governing imaginary concerning the role of knowledge need not be so conceived. Roughly 100 years ago, Robert Frost wrote a sonnet as a young man that argued that an individual’s work, in this case a metaphor for a citizen’s responsibility to act in ways that preserve the rights and freedom for all in the polity, could in fact serve to expand his or her locus of

awareness and understanding beyond the merely instrumental, and beyond a vision of life as simply the result of will, production and consumption. That alternative vision could in itself tie the individual to his or her place in the world and create an ontology of meaning and knowing that was architectonic and broader than the useful, and that did not pretend to human control of all exigencies and circumstances. Perhaps our politics today needs nothing more or less than so sweeping a change in its ontological underpinnings, if we are not to fall prey recurrently to crowd pleasers promising the impossible and claiming that one human's will personified is able to harness all necessary knowledge to conquer our collective challenges. It is clear, as a demagogue prepares to gain a major political party nomination in our nation, that this rethinking and refashioning must come soon. Here is an excerpt from Frost's answer to the perilous epistemic and ontological possibility that Trump embodies and represents.

Mowing³

There was never a sound beside the wood but

One,

And that was my long scythe whispering to
the ground. ...

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor
Knows.

My long scythe whispered and left the hay to
make.

The poem describes a joining of knowing and producing, with production serving knowledge and not the reverse, and with each creating a greater whole together. Self-governance requires just such a foundational guiding vision if it is to escape serving as the architect of its own destruction.

(Originally published May 23, 2016)

Notes

¹ Bacon, Francis. 1893. *The Advancement of Learning*. London: Cassell and

Company, Ltd. Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5500/5500-h/5500-h.htm>.

² Bernstein, Jeremy. 2016. "The Trump Bomb," *New York Review of Books*, May 16, 32-33 at 33.

³ Frost, Robert. 1992. *Selected Poems*. New York, NY: Random House Publishers, p.61.

78 The Danger Within

Robert Kagan, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., and a leading neoconservative who served in the Ronald Reagan administration, unleashed the fury of Newt Gingrich and other past and present GOP leaders in late May when he argued that Donald Trump represented the vanguard of a new fascism in the United States.¹ I share two relevant quotations from Kagan's argument below. The first treats how fascists behave while the second outlines the ways that those they challenge for leadership have often reacted to them:

This phenomenon has arisen in other democratic and quasi-democratic countries over the past century, and it has generally been called 'fascism.' Fascist movements, too, [as with Trump's campaign] had no coherent ideology, no clear set of prescriptions for what ailed society. 'National socialism' was a bundle of contradictions, united chiefly by what, and who, it opposed; fascism in Italy was anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-Marxist, anti-capitalist and anti-clerical. Successful fascism was not about policies but about the strongman, the leader (Il Duce, Der Fuhrer), in whom could be entrusted the fate of the nation. Whatever the problem, he could fix it. Whatever the threat, internal or external, he could vanquish it, and it was unnecessary for him to explain how. Today, there is Putinism, which also has nothing to do with belief or policy but is about the tough man who singlehandedly defends his people against all threats, foreign and domestic.

In such an environment, every political figure confronts a stark choice: Get right with the leader and his mass following or get run over. The human race in such circumstances breaks down into predictable categories—and democratic politicians are the most predictable. There are those whose ambition leads them to jump on the bandwagon. They praise the leader's incoherent speeches as the beginning of wisdom, hoping he will reward them with a plum post in the new order. There are those who merely hope to survive. Their consciences won't let them curry favor so shamelessly, so they mumble their pledges of support, like the victims in Stalin's show trials, perhaps not realizing that the leader and his followers

will get them in the end anyway. A great number will simply kid themselves, refusing to admit that something very different from the usual politics is afoot. Let the storm pass, they insist, and then we can pick up the pieces, rebuild and get back to normal. Meanwhile, don't alienate the leader's mass following. ... This is how fascism comes to America, not with jackboots and salutes (although there have been salutes, and a whiff of violence) but with a television huckster, a phony billionaire, a textbook egomaniac 'tapping into' popular resentments and insecurities, and with an entire national political party—out of ambition or blind party loyalty, or simply out of fear—falling into line behind him.²

Whatever else may be said about Kagan's argument, he was surely correct in his central contention that Trump, like prior demagogic leaders, has offered himself—that is, his person—as a policy prescription for the nation's supposed ills and has engaged in ruthless, misleading and unjust scapegoating and demeaning of other political figures and minority populations during his campaign. But Gingrich did not engage these central concerns in his dismissal of Kagan's essay. Instead, the former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, who has suggested he would consider serving as Trump's vice presidential running mate, was quoted in *The New York Times* as observing that Trump should not be compared to past fascist leaders principally because he does not command a cadre of murderous "brown shirts:"

Trump does not have a political structure in the sense that the fascists did. He doesn't have the sort of ideology that they did. He has nobody who resembles the brown shirts. This is all just garbage.³

Three points are salient as one considers Gingrich's comments. First, the warnings concerning Trump offered by a wide variety of individuals in addition to Kagan are not meant to be literal, nor can they fairly be dismissed as trash. They are intended instead to alert Americans that Trump's promised sort of "leadership" has led historically to tyranny. It is true that the New York businessman does not oversee thousands of thugs as Hitler came to do in the 1920s, but that was not Kagan's point and it misleads profoundly to argue that it was. Gingrich falls neatly into what Kagan called the "ambitious individual" category of politician responses to the rise of fascism.

Second, in a review of the first of a projected two-volume biography of Adolf Hitler by Volker Ullrich in the current issue of the *London Review of Books*, Neal Ascherson comments that Hitler's appeal arose in good part from the combination of his character traits and the context in which he offered those to the masses. Hitler's characteristics are unnervingly familiar in our current national presidential nomination campaign: "What does mark him out is his conscious abandonment of conventional morality: the monstrous, shameless ease with which he lied, betrayed and murdered."⁴ While Trump has not murdered anyone, his behavior, in this campaign and historically, has comported with the first two traits listed.

But if these qualities are appealing to a portion of the American electorate, they are doing so because many who find them attractive are fearful and even paranoid about their perceived economic and social status and about the role of government in the nation. Hitler rose to power in a situation of political chaos, fear and economic stagnation. While the conditions in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s were markedly worse overall by any measure than those now obtaining in the U.S., it seems clear that many of Trump's supporters are drawn to him precisely because he promises to ease their economic situations and perceived decline in social standing while blaming "stupid people" and individuals of different skin color or religious beliefs for those woes. In short, Kagan's analogy with past fascist leaders is not perfect, but it is no less unsettling for that fact, and it cannot be easily dismissed. Indeed, whether one agrees that Trump meets the formal definition of a fascist is beside the point. This is not a debate about etymology, but about the future of the nation, and there is no doubt that Trump is a demagogue who has proselytized in the present campaign for little besides the triumph of his ego while exploiting fears and hatred.

Finally, this fact points to a deeper malady and one for which many of the very leaders now jumping on the Trump bandwagon are partly responsible: the continued decline of what a young Abraham Lincoln called our nation's "political religion" in his Lyceum Address in 1838. That lecture, "The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions," concerned threats to the American regime. Lincoln saw the greatest peril to freedom as likely to arise from within the nation. For decades now, Republican leaders particularly, but not exclusively, have claimed that self-governance rightly represents a shambling afterthought in favor of a market-driven politics and economy. For decades, too, that Party has mobilized individuals to the polls on the basis of barely disguised appeals to discrimination against broad swathes

of the country's population, and today its leaders argue that the rights of citizenship should not be readily extended to the nation's entire adult population. It could be argued that Trump has merely upped the ante and made these sorts of anti-democratic, meretricious and cynical claims more obvious by disparaging publicly and straightforwardly those of brown or black skin as scapegoats for the (overwhelmingly white) citizens who have rallied around him. Those white voters now constitute a de facto social movement whose supporters are willing to denigrate their nation's political institutions and to deprive millions of their basic rights in the name of a demagogue's paean to a false security linked to his personal capabilities.

Lincoln warned of just this eventuality and worried about what might cause it. He was, in this concern, as in so much else, prescient:

I know the American people are much attached to their government; I know they would suffer much for its sake; I know they would endure evils long and patiently before they would ever think of exchanging it for another—yet, notwithstanding all this, if the laws be continually despised and disregarded, if their rights to be secure in their persons and property are held by no better tenure than the caprice of a mob, the alienation of their affections from the government is the natural consequence; and to that, sooner or later, it must come.⁵

Instead of being chastised for their honesty and thoughtfulness, Kagan and others should be commended for highlighting the dangers evident in our current nomination politics and national campaign. That threat must not be “normalized” in favor of a quest for power, individual or institutional. All Americans must persistently be asked by journalists, candidates and their elected leaders alike if the dystopian, simplistic, hatred-filled society that Trump represents is the sort of nation in which they would like to live, and what such a society ultimately would portend for their individual freedom and rights, were it to come to fruition.

(Originally published June 6, 2016)

Notes

¹ Kagan, Robert. 2016. “This is How Fascism Comes to America,” Brookings Institution, *Order from Chaos*, May 22. Available at:

<http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2016/05/22-trump-fascism-in-america-kagan>.

² Kagan, “This is How Fascism Comes to America.”

³ Baker, Peter. 2016. “The Rise of Donald Trump Tracks Growing Debate over Global Fascism,” *The New York Times*, May 28. Available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/world/europe/rise-of-donald-trump-tracks-growing-debate-over-global-fascism.html>.

⁴ Ascherson, Neal. 2016. “Hopping in his Matchbox,” Review of Volker Ullrich, *Hitler: Ascent, 1889-1939*; Translated by Jefferson Chase, *London Review of Books*, 38 (11), June 2, 23-24 at 23.

⁵ Lincoln, Abraham. 1838. “Address before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois,” Abraham Lincoln Online, January 27. Available at: <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm>.

79 Moral Ambiguity, Moral Courage and Democratic Politics

Barack Obama became the first United States president to visit Hiroshima, Japan, during a state visit to that nation in late May. In doing so, he had somehow to address the reality that America attacked that city, and Nagasaki as well, in August 1945 with atomic bombs in a successful bid to end World War II. In his remarks at the Peace Memorial in Hiroshima, the President noted that the toll of that fateful day in that city was beyond horrific, and he highlighted the fact that the devastation had shown human beings could now eliminate their species from the earth. He also argued that acknowledgment of that reality should now undergird all political action:

A flash of light and a wall of fire destroyed a city and demonstrated that mankind possessed the means to destroy itself. Why do we come to this place, to Hiroshima? We come to ponder a terrible force unleashed in a not so distant past. We come to mourn the dead, including over 100,000 in Japanese men, women and children; thousands of Koreans; a dozen Americans held prisoner. Their souls speak to us. They ask us to look inward, to take stock of who we are and what we might become.¹

Before he left for Japan, the President's critics argued vigorously about whether he would apologize for the U.S. action and, certain that he would do so, many criticized him for his alleged foreign policy "weakness." However, Obama did not ask Japan's forgiveness for America's choice to employ nuclear weapons, nor did he declare United States' moral rectitude in its decision to employ that terrible armament. He instead focused on the strong alliance that had developed between Japan and the United States since Hiroshima and the two nations' shared responsibility to help realize a world at peace and without arms of mass destruction. He also reminded those present of the origins and character of the terrible conflict that preceded President Harry Truman's decision to employ atomic weapons:

The World War that reached its brutal end in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was fought among the wealthiest and most powerful of nations. Their civilizations had given the world great cities and magnificent art.

Their thinkers had advanced ideas of justice and harmony and truth. And yet, the war grew out of the same base instinct for domination or conquest that had caused conflicts among the simplest tribes; an old pattern amplified by new capabilities and without new constraints. In the span of a few years, some 60 million people would die—men, women, children no different than us, shot, beaten, marched, bombed, jailed, starved, gassed to death.²

In short, the President acknowledged the profound moral ambiguity represented by the destruction of Hiroshima. That first use of the atomic bomb now symbolizes the fact that one horror ended another human catastrophe of unprecedented scale and cruelty. While the President did not belabor the point, all present knew that the leaders of America's and Japan's armed forces had predicted that an assault to occupy the home islands would likely have cost the Allies and Japanese millions of additional casualties. Likewise, Truman was well aware that the conflict's toll might rise meteorically with an invasion of Japan as he contemplated unleashing nuclear weapons. In every sense then, Hiroshima is a symbol of moral ambiguity. One cannot gainsay the terror unleashed there in the guise of the atomic attack, or the greed and ugly nationalism and racism that occasioned the horrific cost of the conflict that led to Hiroshima in the first instance.

Nor did President Obama seek to do so. He instead emphasized both the human propensity to rationalize evil in the name of power and to war with one another, and the imperative that Hiroshima and other World War II sites of death now signify for humankind to surmount those base instincts:

On every continent, the history of civilization is filled with war, whether driven by scarcity of grain or hunger for gold; compelled by nationalist fervor or religious zeal. Empires have risen and fallen. Peoples have been subjugated and liberated. And at each juncture, innocents have suffered, a countless toll, their names forgotten by time.³

And, as importantly, Obama said the following about human possibility to overcome its inclination to become violently drunk with intellectual or emotional fantasies of superiority or with fears of others, real or imagined:

And perhaps above all, we must reimagine our connection to one another as members of one human race. For this, too, is what makes

our species unique. We're not bound by genetic code to repeat the mistakes of the past. We can learn. We can choose. We can tell our children a different story—one that describes a common humanity; one that makes war less likely and cruelty less easily accepted.⁴

I highlight this recent important speech by the President precisely to point up his willingness to acknowledge moral ambiguity, and to underscore his moral courage and imagination in doing so. He refused at Hiroshima to provide shibboleths that would pretend that events there could readily be justified or understood in a simple and simplistic dichotomous way. Instead, he reminded his audience of just how difficult democratic political choice-making can be, and in lieu of calling for ready answers that do not exist, he asked all instead to accept the complexities of the human condition that Hiroshima and the bombing that forever shaped that city's course represent. Just as importantly, he reminded his listeners that they must have hope that men and women are capable of designing institutions that can grapple peaceably with humankind's capacity to design weapons and to rationalize hatred, lust for power and conflict.

The intellectual and moral humility of the President's speech strikes me as an accurate reading of the reality represented by Hiroshima, and a useful reminder of how warring peoples came to that fateful pass in the first instance. Obama's remarks can be read as a clarion call to Americans to confront reality in all of its difficulty, paradox and messiness, rather than to adopt simplifying ideologies or the fantasy claims of demagogues. Indeed, the nation's citizens would do well to reflect on the President's insights as presumptive GOP presidential nominee Donald Trump continues daily to seek new ways to heighten voters' fears and to rationalize the demonization of specific groups, whether women, Latinos, Muslims, former prisoners of war or journalists.

Hiroshima constitutes a powerful symbol of the fact that bigotry, hatred, nationalism and jingoism yielded a war of unparalleled scale and horror that ended only with similarly brutal acts. One hopes our nation's citizens can learn from Hiroshima's lessons and resist the siren call of crude answers to complex issues, and can likewise demonstrate the moral mettle to say no to a demagogue's contention that scapegoating and grotesque narcissism can address the hard work of maintaining freedom and peace in a complicated world. Americans must show that they are sufficiently mature and possess

adequate moral courage to reject Trump's persistent pandering to their worst instincts.

The coming national election is shaping up as a test of whether a democratic people can accept the moral ambiguities and challenges that attend the human condition and together continue to search for ways to tackle them, or will instead surrender their birthright and fall into conflict among themselves while empowering an anti-democratic leader in that process. My hope is that the polity will pay close attention to the quiet resolution that Obama personified at Hiroshima and follow his example as they look ahead collectively to attend to the challenges necessary to maintain freedom in a hope-filled and determined way. But only time will tell whether this will be so.

(Originally published June 19, 2016)

Notes

¹ Obama, Barack, 2016. "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan at Hiroshima Peace Memorial," The White House Briefing Room, Speeches and Remarks (website), May 27. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/05/27/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-abe-japan-hiroshima-peace>.

² Obama, 2016, "Remarks at Hiroshima Peace Memorial."

³ Obama, 2016, "Remarks at Hiroshima Peace Memorial."

⁴ Obama, 2016, "Remarks at Hiroshima Peace Memorial."

80 A Terrible Inevitability?*

If the upcoming national presidential election was held today and if only white male citizens were to vote in that contest, Donald Trump would become the nation's 45th chief executive by a 49-43 percent vote margin, according to a Pew Research Center poll released last week. According to that same poll, Trump would prevail by about 10 percentage points if only white men and women voted in the November election.¹ Since Trump has not changed as the campaign season has moved forward—he remains a demagogue whose policy positions are typically inflammatory, uninformed or worse, and whose speeches are routinely filled with wildly misleading claims and outright lies—this sad fact suggests that a strong percentage of what is expected to be 70 percent of the electorate in November is willing to accept a jingoistic and profoundly anti-democratic figure as their President. The bedeviling question is why. It seems unlikely from available survey data that the major share of these voters actually believe Trump's outrageous claims that he can force Mexico to pay for a border wall, or “beat” China economically because he has licensed his brand there or that the nation must ban all Islamic immigrants because all Muslims constitute a security threat, among other statements. Instead, something else seems to be occurring, which *The New York Times* has accurately summarized in this way:

In countless collisions of color and creed, Donald J. Trump's name evokes an easily understood message of racial hostility. Defying modern conventions of political civility and language, Mr. Trump has breached the boundaries that have long constrained Americans' public discussion of race. Mr. Trump has [attacked Mexicans](#) as criminals. He has called for a ban on Muslim immigrants. He has wondered aloud why the United States is not 'letting people in from Europe.'²

So, one question that arises is, what are the sources of Trump's racial appeal among whites? For white supremacists and nationalists and anti-Semites as well as the much larger number of whites who are ignorant of other cultures and belief systems, he appears to be a validating figure. As *The Times* has reported,

They hail him as a fellow traveler who has driven millions of white Americans toward an intuitive embrace of their ideals: that race should matter as much to white people as it does to everyone else. He has freed Americans, those activists say, to say what they really believe.³

Trump has done little to dissuade white nationalists of their view that he “really does” support them by his coyness in public when asked to repudiate their repugnant views. For many other whites apparently, too, Trump’s “birther” stance questioning President Obama’s citizenship and his public skepticism of the chief executive’s faith, purporting him to be Muslim and not Christian, contrary to Obama’s own long-time personal profession has provided them space to “other” the President and all minorities and immigrants, and to do so while declaring themselves both innately “superior” to those people, and not racists. Such followers can do so without being overtly discriminatory and while receiving encouragement and support from Trump. In short, Trump’s claims have consciously fed an invidious discriminatory impulse among many whites while exploiting the ignorance and fears of many others.

As noted above, that few of Trump’s frequently bizarre assertions bear any relationship to the facts of the scenarios he addresses has not prevented many white Americans (especially) from supporting the businessman as supposedly, forcefully telling it like it is. In fact, he is doing no such thing. Instead, he appeals to those citizens’ worst instincts and their willingness to heap contempt on others on the basis of their supposed differences. With this turn, “this year, for the first time in decades, overt white nationalism re-entered national politics.”⁴ This is a sad indictment of what Trump represents in current American politics, but I fear a fair accounting nonetheless.

One may perhaps understand, if not condone, the behavior of older white working-class males displaced by globalization, who embrace a demagogue who promises to set their world right again. After all, their preferred political party, the GOP, has very publicly refused, on ideological grounds, to provide them support to address their situation. But even with this group, and even with sympathy for their plight, one must ask why so many are willing to scapegoat and hate individuals who are not responsible for their situation and who do not, as a matter of fact, pose the threat(s) Trump ascribes to them.

I here offer a number of possible responses to this question. First, it appears that Trump and others have successfully joined a share of white Americans' awareness of the uneven impacts of globalization and ongoing demographic change with claims that those shifts represent a zero-sum game with "others" different from them, stealing their rightful social roles and employment. However, while our society's demographics are doubtless changing, there is no evidence either that immigrants are "taking" positions from whites or that they are more inclined to anti-social behavior than whites. What seems clear, instead, is that this shift and the angst concerning it are being exploited politically to mobilize whites around fear of others, identifiably different from themselves, for political gain. In short, this is in considerable measure a perversion of the rightful role of democratic leadership in society. This effort is hardly new. Southern political office-holders practiced it throughout the Jim Crow era, and following the Civil Rights movement, the GOP has employed it since at least Richard Nixon's infamous southern strategy and perhaps most emblematically with Ronald Reagan's false "welfare queens narrative."

Second, this phenomenon of white "othering" is doubtless the consequence of the strong residential segregation of the American population by class and race. It is always easier to exploit fear and anger of the unknown or different, because less difficult to ascribe characteristics, factual or not, to those with whom one does not routinely interact. Trump speaks expansively and ascribes stereotypically ugly and demeaning characteristics to entire populations in his efforts to mobilize the biases of voters who, in truth, often know very little of the populations they are being asked to demonize. Ultimately, their response to Trump's call can only be described as ugly and uninformed.

Third, one must acknowledge the long history of racism and discrimination in this nation toward African Americans, immigrants of all stripes and Native Americans. Of these population groups, only African Americans suffered slavery, but white Americans have treated each of these groups historically with opprobrium, condescension, cruelty and impunity and many continue to do so. One hopes that today's unease among whites does not represent an open embrace of the systematic oppression previously practiced against these populations, either informally in terms of widely accepted norms and mores, or more formally, as Trump has advocated, via legal discrimination.

Fourth, I am not sure what “privilege” even displaced whites believe they are losing that could occasion and justify the semi-fascist, to use author and journalist Peter Steinfels’ memorable descriptor, they are welcoming in Donald Trump.⁵ Are these supporters railing against globalization? If so, scapegoating minority populations and supporting a demagogue will do nothing to address its consequences. More, it is sure to sow continued social enmity, inequality and injustice that will only foster additional popular unease and more violence in the future.

Overall, Trump has behaved as demagogues have always behaved and it appears more than appropriate to be concerned that his appeals to racism and xenophobia have been so readily accepted by so many. The question is, can other American leaders, Republican and Democratic alike, help to redefine the social conditions that have permitted Trump’s rise? The answer is unclear that they can or will do so as I write, for a complex array of ideological and political reasons, especially among leaders of the GOP. One must hope that ways and means can be found to acculturate all citizens to support all portions of the American citizenry exercising voice in the nation’s political processes, irrespective of their race, creed or national origins. One must hope, too, that both parties can work to find common ground to address the economic consequences of globalization for those left behind by those processes. Either leaders from those parties must take such steps, or citizens must demand them, or some combination of these processes must occur to prevent the rise of another Trump figure and/or his election.

Those supporting Trump surely have been unnerved by economic and social change and perceive themselves to be suffering as a result, even if many cannot articulate why precisely that might be so. Friends of freedom and democracy should be quick to recognize these self-perceptions and to find outlets for those who express them in lieu of the demagoguery now beckoning them. The United States is now and will remain a heterogeneous nation. The question this election represents is whether we shall acknowledge that fact and move forward in peace, or continue to engage in polarized hate mongering in ways that threaten the very fabric on which our individual and collective freedom depend. As Steinfels has remarked, this nation is “at a moral crossroads.”⁶

(Originally published July 18, 2016)

* This title is borrowed from a statement by Gerald McGurk, who lost his mother, sister, uncle, friend and several neighbors in a sectarian massacre

during Northern Ireland's decades of "Troubles." See Susan McKay, *Bear in Mind these Dead*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2008, p. 3.

Notes

¹ Cohn, Nate, and Toni Monkovic. 2016. "Is Donald Trump Winning? Among Whites and Men for Sure," *The New York Times*, July 14. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/14/upshot/is-donald-trump-winning-among-whites-and-men-for-sure.html>.

² Confessore, Nicholas. 2016. "For Whites Sensing Decline, Donald Trump Unleashed Words of Resistance," *The New York Times*, July 13. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/14/us/politics/donald-trump-white-identity.html>.

³ Confessore, "For Whites Sensing Decline, Donald Trump Unleashes Words of Resistance."

⁴ Confessore, "For Whites Sensing Decline, Donald Trump Unleashes Words of Resistance."

⁵ Peter Steinfels. 2016. "The Semi-Fascist Candidate," *Commonweal*, 143 (11), May 15, pp.10-12.

⁷ Steinfels, "The Semi-Fascist Candidate."

81 Moral Imagination and Democracy

Robert Reich has described the 2016 Republican Party national presidential nomination convention this way:

The Republican convention of 2016 is a Star Wars barroom of conspiracy nuts, white supremacists, nativists, Birthers, gun crackpots, paranoids, anti-science fruitcakes, old-time Hillary haters, gonzo isolationists, anti-Semites, homophobes, Latinophobes, misogynists, and other know-nothings who have spent their lives on the fringes of the Republican Party, and have now taken it over.¹

One might wish to judge his remarks to be fanciful, if richly descriptive, hyperbole, but unfortunately they hew too close to the truth for comfort. No conspiracy theory, no opportunity to break notions of decorum or decency appeared to go unvoiced or untaken during this year's GOP quadrennial event. In addition to many attendees of the sort Reich described, and harsh and hate-filled rhetoric, the convention saw Republican delegates spend much time yelling from the floor that their nominee's presumed opponent, Hillary Clinton, should be jailed. This completely unfounded assertion echoed the comments of their party's choice, Donald Trump, who has provided an example by labeling all of those who have opposed him during this campaign season with wild or contemptible descriptors or claims. Meanwhile, a Trump aide added to the surreal carnival-like atmosphere at the gathering by seeking to link Clinton afresh to the tragic suicide of one-time White House staffer Vincent Foster in 1993. In addition, Congressperson Al Baldasaro, R-New Hampshire, a Trump advisor on Veterans' affairs, declared that the Democratic standard-bearer and former U.S. Senator and Secretary of State should be "shot for treason."² For his part, the Republican presidential nominee himself added to the weirdness of the convention during a news conference by once again seeking to tie Republican Senator Ted Cruz's father to the John F. Kennedy assassination through his alleged friendship with Lee Harvey Oswald by pointing to a tabloid (*National Enquirer*) story and photo purporting the same.³ That all

of these allegations are factually untrue did not dissuade Trump or his followers from reveling in them or in repeating them (and others) ad nauseum at the convention.

Sadly, Trump has a very long track record of adopting outrageous and despicable positions and never acknowledging error or responsibility when called out for his assertions. So it is that he has refused to apologize for his notorious public comments that President Barack Obama is a Kenyan Muslim in disguise, or for his deeply offensive remark portraying Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, who spent 5 ½ years in a North Vietnamese prison during the Vietnam conflict in which he endured terrible torture, to be somehow beneath contempt. Trump likewise has questioned the capacity of a federal judge to hear a case affecting his (Trump's) business interests because of the judge's Mexican heritage, and he has labeled Clinton "crooked Hillary," even as fact checkers analyzing his speeches have found that between 85 percent and 95 percent of what he says at his various campaign events is either inaccurate, distorting or untrue. Investigations have also raised serious concerns about many of his businesses and his various bankruptcies as well. This list of examples could be extended easily, but it suffices to suggest that the GOP's nominee may fairly be held responsible in considerable measure for the angry, hypocritical, off-putting and frequently ignorant tone and claims adopted by many of his followers. This last point is worth emphasizing, as Trump's nomination acceptance speech was unrelievedly dark and pessimistic in its portrayal of America today. In Trump's telling, only he can save the nation from the crime wave now awash in the nation's cities and towns. As he put it in his address to the convention, his election alone will dispel this imagined trend: "Beginning on January 20, 2017, safety will be restored." ⁴ That is, Trump argues that he will relieve the country from the violence now afoot everywhere, from the economic ruin that officials in both parties have allegedly wrought in their "stupidity," and from the hordes of murderous immigrants now stealing jobs and taking services from the nation's "real" read white citizens. His speech was almost completely empty of substance and deeply mendacious, but it was just as surely narcissistic, relentlessly xenophobic, bigoted and suffused with fear-mongering rhetoric.

The picture Trump has painted of America in his remarks in Cleveland and in his campaign to date has little relationship to the empirical reality of conditions in the nation. The United States is not led by a closeted America-hating Muslim bent on undoing democracy; the country's borders are not

“open” to an unfettered group of immigrant murderers and rapists, nor can immigration pressures be controlled magically by walls, travel restrictions or massive deportations; crime has been falling for years in this nation, notwithstanding a bump up in the murder rate in certain cities this year; and the United States’ unemployment rate stands at less than 5 percent. Moreover, the current economic recovery is the longest in post-World War II history.

I cite none of this to argue that the country does not now confront a variety of economic and social challenges. It surely does, but nothing in Trump’s scapegoating and demonizing rhetoric addresses those legitimate concerns, nor does he offer credible policies or paths to tackle the issues the U.S. now faces. Instead, he tells his followers to blame those of a different color or nationality from themselves for their personal challenges and to place their faith in him as a salvific figure to set those perceived slights and woes right. And he goes further to indicate he would tear up treaties and trade relationships, and would torture, scapegoat and formally discriminate against the populations of many nations and those of the Islamic faith as supposed carriers of terrorism or economic woe.

In all of this, including his red-faced delivery of his nomination acceptance speech, Trump differs little from previous demagogues the world over. Nevertheless, many in his party, and other Americans not affiliated with it, angry that elites within the GOP particularly have failed to address their economic woes, are willing to embrace the rhetoric he offers in lieu of demanding a reasoned accountability from their political leaders. Apparently, it is easier to adopt a dark fantasy vision of the country than to press for prudent, as opposed to magical, approaches to the nation’s challenges.

Apart from Trump’s obvious appeals to fear and bigotry and his self-evident narcissism and their apparent allure in this peculiar period of fear and grievance in specific segments of the nation’s citizenry, I am struck that Trump and the Republican convention he orchestrated point to a larger continuing trend in our nation. Indeed, Trumpism may be said to be an outcome of it, the continuing decline among Americans of the capacity to exercise moral imagination. As Jennifer Boylan wrote recently, Edmund Burke called “the imagining of the humanity of people[s] other than myself as a responsibility, the moral imagination.”⁵ Those seated in the Cleveland arena nodding their heads or leading cheers to support Trump’s ill-conceived arguments for “America First” nativism, his strange conspiracy theories

concerning others with different points of view and unilateral American withdrawal from trade and security commitments all bespeak the decline of a capacity for moral imagination in a significant share of the citizenry in our nation.

A people unwilling to acknowledge the dignity and humanity of others, but willing to stereotype those individuals on the basis of their alleged characteristics and to hate them in the abstract as the perpetrators of imagined woes, is a people that will ultimately prove unable to maintain democratic and human rights for all in its midst in the face of demagogic appeals. A citizenry no longer morally capable of seeing disagreements as opportunities for dialogue, but capable of scapegoating groups or governance processes for its problems, is a population too willing to imagine it can maintain a society as so many atomized groups.

The problem with this vision, however, is that democracy cannot survive if its citizens will not recognize the rights and dignity of all in their midst. If Trump's blunt appeals to racism and xenophobia have demonstrated anything, it is how powerful such calls remain amidst fear, and in a polity in which many political leaders have for five decades also attacked democratic governance as somehow less legitimate than capitalism. But without a politics ultimately rooted in the expansive moral imagination of its people, there can be no individual freedom or democratic institutions, let alone the capitalist enterprises built on their foundation. Trump's assault on human dignity, symbolized repeatedly in his coarse discourse and sound-bite-driven policies leavened with vitriol against "others," has demonstrated both how essential moral imagination is to a democratic society and how fragile it can prove. We must recognize this fundamental reality, and soon, as a citizenry or risk losing our collective capacity to ensure our freedom. This election is not about race-coded calls for "law and order" to address problems allegedly caused by demonized "others" that do not exist as depicted. Instead, the election will decide whether the American people can demand that its leaders begin to wrestle with the nation's actual challenges, rather than continue to deploy stratagems that may mobilize individuals, but may undermine the foundations of the regime their purveyors claim to desire to serve.

(Originally published August 1, 2016)

Notes

¹ Reich, Robert. 2016. "The Republican Convention is a Star Wars Barroom of

Conspiracy Nuts,” July 20. Available at: <http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/38103-the-republican-convention-is-a-star-wars-barroom-of-conspiracy-nuts>.

² Ronayne, Kathleen. 2016. “N.H. Lawmaker Won’t Apologize after Calling for Clinton’s Execution,” *Portland Press Herald*, July 23. Available at: <http://www.pressherald.com/2016/07/23/n-h-lawmaker-criticized-for-remark-about-clinton/>.

³ Farley, Robert. 2016. “Fact Check: Trump defends claim on Oswald and Cruz’s Father,” *USA Today*, July 23. Available at: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/07/23/fact-check-trump-lee-harvey-oswald-rafael-cruz/87475714/>.

⁴ National Public Radio. 2016. “FACT CHECK: Donald Trump’s Republican Convention Speech, Annotated,” July 21. Available at: <http://www.npr.org/2016/07/21/486883610/fact-check-donald-trumps-republican-convention-speech-annotated>.

⁵ Boylan, Jennifer. 2016. “Bring Moral Imagination Back in Style,” *The New York Times*, July 22. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/23/opinion/bring-moral-imagination-back-in-style.html>.

82 Fear and Bigotry: Democracy's Achilles Heel?

Many analysts have sought to determine which groups of voters have supported Donald Trump thus far in this campaign season. The consensus seems to be that the developer has drawn his core support from white working class (non-college-educated) middle-aged males who believe they have been adversely affected by globalization and that government has not done enough to assist them in their plight. Many in this group are convinced that public officials have exacerbated their personal difficulties by proving too willing to countenance what they view as unfair trade deals and undue immigration, among other concerns. In addition, many of these citizens believe their relative social status has declined, even as income inequality has risen markedly. Indeed, analysts of all stripes agree that this population is collectively angry about its economic and social standing. But there is far less agreement among commentators concerning who bears responsibility for this group's situation. Some argue these people are "failures" because they did not individually respond to economic and social change effectively (this was a primary theme of the 2012 Republican National Convention), while others have observed that these voters' individual and collective anger is understandable, if inappropriately targeted. Likewise, some analysts have suggested that because there are grounds for at least a share of these voters' ire, and because they have voted for a demagogue and the U.S. is a democratic society, their choice is, *per se*, a legitimate one. Other political commentators and scholars, however, have argued that supporting a manifestly unqualified "semi-fascist"¹ who has repeatedly demonstrated his unfitness for the Presidency by his obvious ignorance and his appeals to bigotry is an abdication of democratic responsibility.

Analysts and partisans surely disagree concerning who should be held accountable for the circumstances confronting this voting bloc. As noted, they also differ in their assessment of whether these individuals' choice of candidate is a legitimate one, especially since many of these citizens, when asked, claim to realize that Trump lacks the knowledge necessary to be President. Some voters and commentators have suggested that the GOP nominee's nearly complete dearth of substantive policy understanding and his racist and nativist campaign appeals need not be concerning because he

can (and could) rely on advisors to provide leavening and expertise. Others, however, aware of Trump's continuing hate-oriented vitriol and apparent interest in creating enmity and conflicts for their own sake (concerning race, religion, military service, imagined personal insults—the list is long), even in the face of contrary counsel, have suggested that the nominee cannot be substantively “advised,” as he believes that his view is always superior to that of others. Finally, some have argued that Trump, with his hate and fear mongering, is simply signaling that new policies are necessary, although this argument is easy to dismiss, as demagoguery is hardly a responsible or democratically effective way to press for political or social change.

Indeed, this issue has emerged as central for me as this campaign has progressed. Put simply, one can well understand the unease and frustration of Trump's primary supporters, but nevertheless ask why this voting bloc has responded to autocratic, xenophobic and racist appeals and not demanded policy and ideological changes from their party and political leaders in a more responsible and democratic way. On this question, commentators differ, too. Some, especially local media outlets, have continued to suggest that Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are equals as candidates, and these analysts treat the campaign as a horse race, concentrating on the drama of the Republican nominee's tweets and Clinton's latest polls and speeches. This stance, it seems to me, is both morally and democratically irresponsible, as it tolerates an authoritarian turn, deliberate race baiting and ugly bigotry on Trump's part by giving him a megaphone to press his assertions while appearing to equate his rhetoric and behavior with that of his rival. This is nonsense and a recipe for tyranny. The critical challenge of democracy is now, and ever has been, that it demands prudence and veneration of equality of its citizens, and those embracing and/or peddling autocracy and hate against immigrants and on the basis of religious faith or any other characteristic are patently undermining these fundamental requirements of self-governance. Put more directly, those embracing Trump's messianic claims and screaming epithets against Muslims or Jews, or maligning the disabled and others at the candidate's rallies, as seen in a video released by *The New York Times* of footage taken at the GOP nominee's campaign events in recent months, daily undermine not only the nation's founding values, but also its capacity for democratic self-governance as they do so.²

Some other Republican political leaders meanwhile, continue to countenance Trump's vacuousness and demagoguery on the view that should he win, their favored party will likely also retain its hold on Congress,

or if he loses in a close election, they will nonetheless likely maintain power in the nation's legislature. In my view, however, justifying a demagogue on such purely personal and partisan grounds is morally bankrupt and a complete repudiation of these political leaders' pledge to uphold the Constitution. In short, it is not reasonable to embrace the authoritarianism, bigotry and nativism that Trump has unleashed on the basis of an argument that it is "okay because it may ensure continued power for me and for my party." In fact, such a choice entails the usurpation of democratic governance for the nation and that should not, and cannot be sacrificed for partisan concerns.

All of this said, one is left pondering why a portion of the electorate, so self-professedly angry at elites, has nevertheless elected to support an individual who is neither "one of them" in any sense, nor knowledgeable nor temperamentally suited to assume the presidency. *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen has offered the most persuasive analysis of this concern I have encountered to date, but his answer is still inadequate in my view. It is also profoundly discomfiting:

Tolstoy wrote of 'epidemic suggestion' to describe those moments when humanity seems to be gripped by a kind of mass hypnosis that no force can counter. The resulting movements, like the Crusades or the 17th-century Dutch tulip craze, cannot be controlled. We find ourselves in such a moment.

To imagine that the words I write, or those of countless others lamenting the world's lurch toward the politics of violence, may stem this 'epidemic suggestion' is to indulge in fantasy. It is part of the infernal nature of such eruptions that everything feeds them, including outrage. The slouching beast is insatiable. Warnings of danger are just the self-important whining of those in whose favor the decadent, soon-to-be-destroyed system has been rigged. The movement is the answer. Mendacity is the new truth. Choreography is stronger than content. The world is upside-down.

Writing into such an environment is like directing a canoe into a gale.³

I share Cohen's view about writing in the current political scenario. What is more, I can think of no compelling substantive reason (I do not count their fear and loathing as such concerns) why those now supporting Trump have

chosen to do so, given the dangers he poses to self-governance. Moreover, I can think of many demands Trump's followers might have made and courses they might have adopted that did not call popular self-rule and the country's future as a nation into question, as supporting Trump has done. Yet, I remain unwilling to follow Cohen in believing that the American people writ large are incapable of resisting the GOP nominee's embrace of blind and ignorant hatred and authoritarianism, or of crafting reasoned strategies by which to address the genuine needs and concerns of his core constituency.

In fact, pollsters have found that there are indeed anti-Semites, white nationalists and racists among Trump's followers, but I do not believe that is true of all of those presently supporting the GOP nominee. I remain hopeful that the more outrageous he becomes—and he daily has shown himself to be incapable of self-control and responsible behavior—the more those who support him reflexively on grounds of fear, power, party or ideology, or without thinking too deeply about the implications of what he represents for the nation, will begin to see him for what he is and ensure he is not elected. As I have argued often in this space, those who contend that continued assaults on self-governance are merely partisan posturing that can be dismissed need only look at the latest polls concerning the massive decline in Americans' collective belief in their nation's institutions (of all sorts) for strong evidence to the contrary. Oddly, those surveys suggest that many of our nation's political elites have convinced millions of Americans in the last 40 years that self-governance is a problem rather than freedom's accompanying responsibility, a heavy burden that those who have so proselytized must bear.

Nonetheless, I continue to hope that the nation's citizens will prevent Trump's attempt to usurp their birthright by recalling they collectively represent the bulwark of democracy. Only their prudent action can preserve self-governance and freedom in the face of a would-be authoritarian demagogue.

(Originally published August 15, 2016)

Notes

¹ Steinfels, Peter. 2016. "The Semi-Fascist Candidate," *Commonweal*, 143 (11), May 15, pp.10-12.

² Berenstein, Erica, Nick Corasanti and Ashley Parker. 2016. "Unfiltered Voices from Donald Trump's Crowds" *The New York Times*, August 4. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/>

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³ Cohen, Roger. 2016. "Trump and the End of Truth," *The New York Times*, July 25. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/26/opinion/trump-and-the-end-of-truth.html>.

83 Reaping a Whirlwind: Delegitimizing Self-Governance

One of the regions of the nation forecasters predict will vote strongly for Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump this November is central Appalachia, including West Virginia, far southwestern Virginia, eastern Tennessee and eastern Kentucky. This expectation raises the question of why voters in these economically hard-hit coal-mining areas are supporting the GOP standard-bearer. Like many writers, I have sought to point up that Trump's claims and rhetoric, including those offered at rallies in the Appalachian region, are typically empty, often puerile and represent a dangerous assault on our nation's central values and regime principles. Nonetheless, many citizens in Appalachia and elsewhere continue to support the New York businessman. In consequence, and like many analysts, I have struggled to understand why. Indeed, I laid out many of the contrasting viewpoints now in the public dialogue concerning this question in my recent *Soundings*.

Here, however, I want to point-up a larger concern as it links to the Trump phenomenon, raised in a recent book by eastern-Kentucky born author J.D Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*.¹ Vance's book is tragic-comic and poignant as he traces the remarkable trajectory of his life to date—he is now 31—and argues that it can stand as a metaphor for thousands of Appalachians confronted with the continued decline of their region's economy and the quickening erosion of their traditional way of life. He considers himself more than lucky to have escaped experiencing the far less auspicious personal fates of many of his family members and peers.

Vance tells the story of his drug-addicted mother and her parents: his tough-as-nails grandparents, who took their daughter north to the Miami Valley of Ohio to escape the dearth of opportunity in eastern Kentucky. They successfully entered the middle class economically, but never left behind the culture of their native region. Vance's narrative chronicles the travails inflicted by his mother's physical addictions (alcohol and later, heroin) and psychological illness and the vagaries of his grandparents' rocky relationship. He suggests his story is hardly unique in the region, despite the daunting number of "adverse childhood events" he underwent that psychologists would describe as permanently life-scarring.

Vance's story is complex and honestly told, and ultimately he credits his grandparents, and particularly his grandmother, with pushing him to be one of the few people in his family and his high school to go on to higher education, and the only one thereafter to graduate from the Yale University law school. He suggests that while he has now attained financial success and emotional stability in his life, he is one of a minority to do so among his extended family and the region he calls home.

Vance seeks to explain why this is so and to craft suggestions concerning what might be done to address the continuing economic and social decay of Central Appalachia. As he does so, he suggests both that governments must play a role in helping citizens of hard-hit communities in the region (a position antithetical to that taken by many of his fellow conservatives) and that one should not expect that such efforts will alone be sufficient, since the area's residents ultimately also must play a large role in rebuilding their culture. He also contends more absolutely that *only* the area's citizens can save their region's way of life from continuing decline. In addition, Vance suggests that locals too often "game" the public-aid programs that offer food and income support to the poor, disabled and unemployed and that this situation has played a role in undermining the area's traditional values of hard work and self-reliance.

The author asserts that observing such incidents of exploitation and their rationalization by those engaged in them made him deeply angry as a young man. In short, as an avowed conservative, Vance is nonetheless all over the map in describing his views concerning whether governments should respond to the difficulties Appalachian residents continue to experience and whether those efforts should be undertaken on moral or other grounds. He finally appears to call for national, state and local governments to work to assist the area's citizens, while also demanding that Appalachia's residents play a large role in overcoming the social maladies that now accompany the area's difficult economic conditions. This seems a reasonable stance, although, as I noted above, one hardly in keeping with the GOP's regnant orthodoxy concerning the issue.

As he tries to make sense of what is happening to his native community and to those he calls "his people," Vance outlines the often outlandish and cartoonish conspiratorial views so often countenanced by his fellow "hillbilly" citizens and conservatives, including arguments that President Barack Obama is not an American citizen and is a closeted Muslim, among

several other widely and wholly discredited examples. He then follows that catalogue with the observation:

The list goes on. It's impossible to know how many people believe one or many of these stories. ... This isn't some libertarian mistrust of government policy, which is healthy in any democracy. This is deep skepticism of the very institutions of our society. And it's becoming more and more mainstream.²

Two paragraphs later Vance comments:

Here is where the rhetoric of modern conservatives (and I say this as one of them) fails to meet the real challenges of their biggest constituents. Instead of encouraging engagement, conservatives increasingly foment the kind of detachment that has sapped the ambition of so many of my peers. ... What separates the successful from the unsuccessful are the expectations that they had for their own lives. Yet the message of the right is increasingly: It's not your fault that you're a loser; it's the government's fault.³

It is this argument that connects Vance's book to current efforts to understand why substantial swathes of Appalachia's (and the nation's) population are supporting a demagogue, even in the face of massive empirical evidence that undermines his sweeping, cynical and ill-considered claims. Trump's supporters are daily exhorted in this campaign to disengage from the institutions that sustain self-governance in favor of "magical thinking." The GOP nominee's rhetoric echoes decades of Republican Party attacks on the legitimacy of those public processes and organizations. And since that legitimacy is sustained only by civic virtue and citizen involvement and good will and Trump's followers appear content to cede their governance responsibility to a demagogue offering himself as "the answer" and have exhibited little but ill will at the candidate's events, the nation now appears to be reaping an anti-democratic whirlwind seeded and nurtured in part by power-seeking GOP officials since at least the 1960s.

Democracy cannot survive in the long run without an engaged and prudential citizenry. While it can surely withstand its small share of people bent on believing in nonsensical conspiracy theories, the matter becomes much more serious when a major political party nominates a purveyor of such mendacity for the presidency. Indeed, Trump has only doubled down

in these terms lately by offering claims that the coming election must be considered “rigged” unless he wins (recent polls have shown him trailing nationally). These arguments sow the seeds for discontent among his supporters to the extent that those voters perceive his argument as plausible and given their willingness to countenance his many other falsehoods, there is every reason to be concerned they might. Indeed, in light of how many Trump followers continue to embrace complete fabrications in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary, this turn potentially represents an extremely difficult scenario for our nation’s collective governance. If the Republican nominee’s supporters become convinced that the nation’s electoral processes are “rigged” against their preferred candidate, as Trump has argued is the case (on the basis of no evidence whatsoever), that could only result in a further deterioration of the regime’s legitimacy in a share of the U.S. electorate in which, as Vance notes, it is already tenuous at best.

In sum, it should not surprise anyone that a political party that has garnered voter support for decades by strongly denigrating popular rule and self-governance would eventually convince its base to believe its claims, even when those assertions were false. But all those who favor, “reasoned discourse, civil dissent, coherent logic and other theoretical north stars of political debate,” as columnist Leonard Pitts put it recently, cannot simply accept this outcome or Trump’s hyper-exacerbation of a pernicious long-term trend.⁴ As Vance’s memoir makes clear, the conservative movement and the GOP are at something of a crossroads. Their decades-long attacks on self-governance as an evil in order to mobilize voters to support unfettered capitalism have now, ironically, found a willing core group of acolytes who appear content to give up their responsibility to govern themselves to a demagogue who offers fairy-tale responses to the very real difficulties they confront.

It is well past time for those who favor limited government to find other ways to make their arguments in lieu of undermining the social legitimacy of the institutions on which all of society must depend to sustain its freedom. As Vance’s memoir illustrates with great piquancy, the consequences are simply too high for the Republican Party and conservative movement to continue to press what is now so plainly a self-defeating course for the American people. How effectively the Party and its supporters address this concern is not a partisan issue, nor a critique of reasoned disagreements concerning the appropriate scope and reach of government action, but a profoundly important imperative that could well determine whether this

nation can continue to enjoy meaningful self-governance in accord with its professed Constitutional values.

(Originally published August 29, 2016)

Notes

¹ Vance, James David. 2016. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. New York: Harper –Collins.

² Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, p.193.

³ Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, p.194.

⁴ Pitts, Leonard Jr. 2016. “Fed Up with Trump but Can’t Walk Away,” *The Miami Herald*, August 19. Available at: <http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/leonard-pitts-jr/article96808292.html>.

84 Pondering Power and Injustice in Democratic Politics

I have been struck in recent days by how often ideological commitment coupled with an orientation to political power alone can result in cruel and unjust treatment of specific groups of citizens in this country. Of course, this phenomenon is hardly new in the United States or to its democracy. One need only reflect on the carnival-like revelry that surrounded public lynchings of African Americans in the Jim Crow South, or on the historical treatment of Native Americans, among many other groups, to recall that what we are now experiencing as a polity is hardly new. That said, devotees of self-governance should always be willing to point up injustices and to decry their representatives' actions when these deny citizens their human rights or treat populations unjustly on the basis of their characteristics or wealth. This must be so, whether we ever attain a democratic ideal as a people, if we are collectively to protect our freedom.

Several recent national news stories have pointed to this reality. It is clear, for example, that much of GOP presidential nominee Donald Trump's campaign is predicated on the demonization of Muslims, African Americans and immigrants to this country, and so itself constitutes a manifest injustice targeted at those populations on the basis of fear and prejudice. In addition to the Trump example, I briefly describe two other currently unfolding scenarios suggesting this form of injustice.

The first has arisen from Virginia's long-term willingness to ignore federal law and a 1999 U.S. Supreme Court decision requiring that the state offer appropriate community-based support to its citizens with disabilities. The State's legislature not only has not provided adequate services for that population for decades, but its members did not begin to address that reality with anything like vigor until the United States Department of Justice threatened to file suit in 2011 to compel the state to do so.¹ A settlement followed in 2012 in which Virginia promised to rectify the situation its leaders had created, but as I write, and as a recent story in *The Roanoke Times* highlighted, more than 12,000 individuals with disabilities (and their families seeking to assist them) have been declared eligible for state-support for community-based assistance, but continue to be denied that aid because Virginia's leaders have not provided funding to offer it.² Elected officials have

“explained” their continued lack of support for this population by suggesting that such efforts are relatively expensive and that most of those aided will not “contribute” to the Commonwealth’s economy.

Importantly, the state has not lacked funds in any absolute sense to provide adequate community-based support to these Virginians and their families. Instead, its leaders have chosen not to do so. Indeed, lawmakers have seen fit to continue to discriminate against this population in good measure because its members do not vote in large numbers, have little political salience and have long been the target of popular ignorance and prejudice. The neoliberal ideological argument that these individuals have no value as a group, since many of them cannot work, has apparently reinforced this raw political judgment among legislators. It has, therefore, been almost politically costless in the state for elected leaders to deny these individuals their rights and promised services under law. The result has been long-term mistreatment and injustice visited on thousands of individuals and their families because it was easy for lawmakers to rationalize doing so. It is obvious that this political orientation is, in both principle and practice, profoundly anti-democratic and immoral. Moreover, it should be recalled that the Justice Department had to force the state to acknowledge that its stance was illegal to compel Virginia’s leaders even to begin fully to realize responsibilities they had largely ignored for decades. If one views this as a moral test of the leaders of the Commonwealth, they have surely failed, and continue to fail it.

A second example of this sort of political behavior lately in the news occurred in East Chicago, Indiana, where, as *The New York Times* reported, 1,100 residents of a housing development must relocate due to extremely toxic levels of lead in the soil where they live.³ That exposure to lead is dangerous has been known for decades. Even limited contact with it has been found to cause learning disabilities among small children who have been exposed to it in older homes with lead-based paint on the walls or, as in the Indiana case, in the soil where they play. While this reality is well known and the human cost to mostly poor Americans is equally well documented, many state and national legislators, disproportionately Republicans, have actively worked to prevent vigorous clean-up efforts on the grounds that the cost of doing so to the relevant industry was too high. For its part, the chemical industry historically has fought all efforts to press it to assist with cleaning up its toxic brew on the same grounds. Meanwhile, the human toll continues to rise, and it falls disproportionately on a political constituency

ill-equipped to press its claims in the policy advocacy process. As one reader summarized the issues in a comment on *The Times* article:

It is not surprising that this kind of disparity exists. Like so many things, the squeaky wheel gets the grease, and in this case being squeaky requires money and clout. If my middle-class neighborhood got a letter saying 'don't play in the dirt,' there would be outrage and we would spend the money to get expert help. Every local doctor and lawyer would be helping for free. What's frustrating about this story (and Flint for that matter) is that it doesn't need to happen. We have the technical know-how to fix it. What's missing is a strong ethic of environmental justice and the funding to give these people an actual empowered voice in these decisions.⁴

Columnist and Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman has underlined this evidence of continued willingness of political leaders to sacrifice the rights of already disadvantaged citizens by highlighting the ongoing effort to clean up the lead-contaminated water supply of Flint, Michigan. Krugman has used that tragedy and the Indiana example to suggest that what should be a straightforward bi-partisan political response to an important public health issue has instead too often become a partisan concern that has left afflicted citizens bereft and exposed to terrible environmental contaminants:

Lead paint was finally taken off the market in 1978, but then ideology stepped in. The Reagan administration insisted that government was always the problem, never the solution—and if science pointed to problems that needed a government solution, it was time to deny the science and bully the scientists, or at least make sure that panels helping set official policy were stuffed with industry-friendly flacks. The administration of George W. Bush did the same thing.⁵

Like many others, Krugman has appropriately decried the injustice and inhumanity of a politics that would endanger children's well-being and lives and those of adults, too, to protect industry profits or because the group affected can easily be blamed for its own situation in broader political mobilization efforts.

For Krugman the crises in Indiana and Michigan suggest that any quest for the public weal has too often become a partisan issue, at least in the

environmental policy domain. My own sense is that the nation's parties have always disagreed on how to pursue the public's interest, but the GOP has now adopted an ideology, and is supporting a presidential nominee, that justifies scapegoating and discriminating against entire populations in its efforts to gain and retain power. The result is ugly for those citizens disadvantaged by the nation's capitalist economy or by public policies aimed at supporting market elites, and who can be maligned on the basis of its characteristics to appeal to the worst instincts of other voters. Thousands of Virginia's citizens with disabilities, as the example above attests, have long been denied support from the state, even after the Commonwealth had declared them eligible for services, because General Assembly members could ignore them with little political fear or cost as an already much discriminated against population.

None of this is new, however unjust and sad it may be. As fallible human beings, Americans have always struggled to realize the noble aspirations enshrined in their Declaration of Independence and Constitution, but it is always appropriate to point out when leaders and citizens fall short of those aims, and especially when those goals themselves appear to have fallen prey to a quest for power at the cost of the rights and dignity of a share of the nation's citizens. We appear to be in such a situation now, in which many political elites have adopted a more or less absolutist, individualist-oriented ideology that also imagines that the market can replace democratic governance, and that is too willing, too often, to sacrifice the rights of those not seen as their supporters in order to attain and retain political power. The costs of this orientation in visiting injustice on specific groups are obvious. So, too, is its ongoing degrading impact on the broader citizenry's enervating capacity even to aim to realize its ideals.

The nation's current Trumpian moment of political degradation may provide an opportunity for some soul searching by a share of its elites who have demonstrated a willingness to impose injustice on targeted populations in the name of securing and maintaining power. Self-governance and freedom require more of political leaders if they are to ensure justice, as these goals demand more of the general citizenry as well. Demagogues and autocrats have always exploited human fears and prejudices in their quest for power. Those who would serve freedom must eschew that ready path and work to ensure the rights of all citizens, whether or not they are supporters, and irrespective of whether they are powerful, or rich or poor. This is a

lesson for the ages if freedom is to be our regime's watchword, and one that our current political leaders would do well to consider deeply.

(Originally published September 12, 2016)

Notes

¹ Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, "DOJ Settlement Agreement," no date (website). Available at: <http://www.dbhds.virginia.gov/individuals-and-families/developmental-disabilities/doj-settlement-agreement>.

² Kleiner, Sara. 2016. "Va.'s New Waiver Program Launched," *The Roanoke Times*, September 2. Available at: http://www.roanoke.com/news/virginia/redesign-of-virginia-s-waiver-program-for-people-with-disabilities/article_a0a50cdd-bf18-5a7e-880c-451aa9341649.html.

³ Goodnough, Abby. 2016. "Their Soil Toxic, 1100 Indian Residents Scramble to find new Homes," *The New York Times*, August 30. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/31/us/lead-contamination-public-housing-east-chicago-indiana.html?comments#permid=19649715>.

⁴ S., Dan. 2016. "Their Soil Toxic, 1100 Indian Residents Scramble to find new Homes," *The New York Times* [comment], August 30. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/31/us/lead-contamination-public-housing-east-chicago-indiana.html?comments#permid=19649715>.

⁵ Krugman, Paul. 2016. "Black Lead Matters," *The New York Times*, September 2. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/02/opinion/black-lead-matters.html>.

85 Post-Truth Politics, Trump and Coal Country

Roger Cohen is an internationally renowned columnist and author who recently journeyed to Eastern Kentucky in Appalachia to talk with citizens whose communities have been hard hit by the decline in the coal industry in recent decades. As a group, these individuals were historically Democrats, but have become reliably Republican in recent years. Support for Donald Trump in this region now runs strong. The question is why, and it is that concern that Cohen went to explore. His resulting article appeared in *The New York Times*.¹ I found Cohen's reporting thoughtful and nuanced, and he provided a rich portrait of the region's changed politics and the reasons its residents offered for that shift in his relatively short essay.

Echoing others' arguments, Cohen found a deep despair and anger among those with whom he spoke. This finding was surely predictable, given how not only the industry, but also the way of life represented by coal mining, has been declining in Appalachia, and the dearth of ready economic alternatives available there. As he observed,

There's a sense, crystallized in coal's steady demise, that, as the political scientist Norman Ornstein put it to me, 'Somebody is taking everything you are used to and you had'—your steady middle-class existence, your values, your security. It's not that the economy is bad in all of Kentucky; the arrival of the auto industry has been a boon, and the [state's] unemployment rate is just 4.9 percent. It's that all the old certainties have vanished.²

The reasons for coal's decline include the intense mechanization that has characterized the industry for many decades, a trend that has resulted in a steady reduction in the number of jobs available for miners. This development has been exacerbated by the advent of mountain-top removal mining in lieu of long-wall efforts. The former employs huge power shovels and dump trucks operated by many fewer employees than traditional underground mining efforts. In addition to these changes in the industry, natural gas is now less expensive and considerably less polluting than Appalachian coal. As a result, power generation companies and many other

industrial users now prefer it to coal. Accordingly, the natural gas industry has experienced a boom that has simultaneously reduced demand for coal.

In addition to these changes wrought by technological innovation and market shifts, the air quality of Appalachian coal's largest customer, China, has become so poor that that nation's government has actively begun to replace the country's coal-fired electrical plants with alternative fuel sources as quickly as feasible. Moreover, Chinese economic growth has slowed in the recent period and that, too, has diminished demand for the region's coal. Finally, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has sought to improve America's own air quality pursuant to its legislative mandate by requiring the coal industry to improve its pollution abatement technologies. That effort has surely squeezed some coal firms' profitability, at least at the margin.

These trends are all beyond the specific control of miners or their families and have primarily to do with capitalism's search for efficiencies, and secondarily with our nation's quest for a sustainable ecology. The major drivers of the region's present crisis are not the result of government actions or policies, but instead of global competition among energy producers as well as changing extraction technologies and demand patterns. Nonetheless, Cohen found that those he interviewed were uniformly convinced that President Barack Obama had personally launched and was vigorously prosecuting a "War on Coal," and that was the primary factor for the economic decline of the industry so vital to their communities:

Kentucky voted twice for Bill Clinton before going solidly Republican in presidential elections. Now Kentuckians are clambering aboard the Trump train—and to heck with its destination. Obama is blamed for the collapse of coal, particularly in eastern Kentucky, and the ever more stringent standards of the Environmental Protection Agency. Beyond that, the blame is aimed at airy-fairy liberals more concerned about climate change—often contested or derided — than about Americans trying to make their house payments.³

It is hardly coincidental that so many residents of the region have come to this conclusion. The industry has blamed government pollution reduction efforts for its diminishing employment for decades. Likewise, the GOP is on record arguing that climate change is not real and regulation is therefore unduly onerous or even unnecessary, despite the overwhelming scientific

consensus to the contrary. And Donald Trump has embraced that same mantra. Given this political advocacy, undertaken to encourage citizens to scapegoat the government as responsible for the continued decline of their most important local industry and to mobilize them simultaneously in partisan terms, it should surprise no one that while a far less significant factor than any of the other major trends outlined above, voters have settled on personalizing their fear (i.e., the belief that “the President is evil and out to get me and my family”) and embraced a demagogue as their answer to the perceived enemy: their own government (which is to say, themselves). This is a real and vitally important paradox. Here is how one of Cohen’s interviewees described this turn:

Jenny Williams, an English teacher at Hazard Community and Technical College, told me it’s past time to get over divisions between “Friends of Coal”—a popular movement and bumper sticker—and anti-coal environmentalists to forge a creative economy around agriculture, ecotourism, education and small-scale manufacture. Coal, she observed, was never going to last forever. ‘How could any idiot support Trump?’ she said. ‘But when you’ve been on \$70,000 a year in coal mines, and your life’s pulled out from under you, who else can you be mad at but the government?’⁴

The answer to Williams’ question might be, “well, many other factors might more reasonably be cited as at least partly responsible for coal’s decline, before one demonizes the President or holds government regulation alone responsible.” To begin, citizens might hold the coal companies accountable for their situation, as those firms have often treated the lives and safety of miners with an amazing casualness or otherwise abused the power associated with their absentee ownership of much of the land of the region. Or these residents might demand changes in government policies, by calling on the nation to do a better job of supporting unemployed and displaced workers (steps which, perversely, the GOP has often vigorously opposed). These possibilities could be multiplied. In short, one can think of many far more important factors that residents could articulate as responsible for their difficult predicament (and means to address it) than the EPA or the President’s alleged personal animus (for which there is no evidence).

Nevertheless, as noted above, Cohen’s interviewees did not cite these more compelling concerns when speaking with him. Instead, they blamed

environmental policy and contended that the President intensely dislikes them and is acting to hurt them in self-conscious ways. Since one of these “explanations” is not factually true and the other is a classic case of scapegoating, the obvious question is why voters might adopt these arguments. While one might offer a number of hypotheses, the most compelling in my view is that both the coal firms and the Republican Party have told the region’s citizens repeatedly that the government was responsible for their woes.

That this was not principally the case mattered little if voters, in their angst and fear, could be convinced of this claim, and it is clear that many have been so persuaded. Not coincidentally, this pretense has also reflected and served the GOP’s prevailing anti-governance ideology. To this obfuscation, Trump has added another equally facetious set of claims: that he alone could accomplish the following goals (without saying how) needed to bring coal-based prosperity back to the region:

- Single-handedly change the globalized trade system,
- Eliminate the Chinese pollution problem while ensuring that nation’s continued (and increased) demand for Appalachian coal
- Overcome the fact of ongoing mechanization of the mining industry, including major changes in mining technology leading to a declining need for labor and
- Overcome the fact of competition from natural gas
- Somehow assure that America’s air becomes cleaner while burning more fossil fuels.
- He can, of course, do none of these things as a matter of his will, assuming they could be accomplished at all, and saying he can do so profoundly misleads and misinforms those supporting him.

In sum, it does no disservice to this region or to its hardworking people to point out that they have been victimized by the coal industry, their presumed benefactor, twice over. First, Republican political leaders, the industry’s principal political allies who work closely with those firms, have been more interested in partisan positioning and power and ideological claims than in assisting these residents, and have falsely led their communities to believe that government created their parlous economic situation and that climate change and coal’s decline together constitute constructed cruelties aimed at undermining their way of life. Second, those same political leaders and

coal firms have systematically misled the region's citizens, and continue to do so, by claiming that the only instrument equipped and potentially willing to assist them—government—is their enemy. Rather than roll up their sleeves and demand that their state and national public institutions aggressively support them in devising new strategies to create new economic possibilities for their communities, these citizens are instead supporting a demagogue and a party with no interest in assisting them meaningfully.

Whatever one's partisanship, this is a punishing irony visited on a population that deserves far better. It seems clear that the coal region's citizens have been treated to a massive dose of today's new "post-truth" politics, in which candidates and leaders may assert whatever they please, regardless of whether it has any basis in reality, and refuse to be held accountable thereafter for such arguments when challenged.⁵ Appalachia's citizens surely should not be the targets of this cynical shell game. Indeed, all Americans deserve, and must demand, better.

(Originally published September 26, 2016)

Notes

¹ Cohen, Roger. 2016. "We need Somebody Spectacular:' Views from Trump Country," *The New York Times*, September 9. Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/opinion/sunday/we-need-somebody-spectacular-views-from-trump-country.html>.

² Cohen, "We need Somebody Spectacular."

³ Cohen, "We need Somebody Spectacular."

⁴ Cohen, "We need Somebody Spectacular."

⁵ Davies, William. 2016. "The Age of Post-Truth Politics," *The New York Times*, August 24. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html>.

86 In Search of Democratic Deliberation

One of the more difficult questions the current unprecedented presidential campaign has raised is how so many voters have come to support Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, whom analysts of all political persuasions have frequently and rightly labeled a demagogue. It is a critical concern, and I have been examining it in recent commentaries, because Trump is manifestly temperamentally unqualified for the office and because he has demonstrated profound ignorance of salient policy issues and of democratic governance itself. The real estate mogul's rise highlights the question of the current character of democratic deliberation in our polity.

As evidence that Trump does not possess the personal character to serve as President, many critics have offered the rhetoric he has employed, which is aimed often at belittling and “othering” various groups both within and beyond American society. He has, for example, attacked veterans, immigrants of virtually all stripes, women, Muslims, African Americans, those with disabilities, and those who weigh more than the average for their body size, notwithstanding his own obesity. There appear to be no limits to his hypocrisy, to his ignorance of policy concerns, foreign and domestic, to his vanity and to his willingness to appeal to the basest instincts of his audiences. He has also shown himself, for many years, to be the purveyor of conspiratorial claims, including his long-lived, and apparently continuing, embrace of the false view that President Obama is not a United States citizen. His recent round of now infamous tweets offering his criticisms of former beauty queen Alicia Machado exemplify a by now long-established pattern of behavior. He has demonstrated repeatedly that he knows no scruples in his public pronouncements if he perceives that he has been criticized or believes he can aggrandize himself in offering them.

Thus far, this behavior has been formally supported by the national leaders of the Republican Party, including Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Party Chairperson Reince Preibus. Whatever his affronts, these officials have not disavowed Trump or his self-evident demagoguery. I emphasize this point because one of the arguments the GOP standard bearer's supporters raise is that if he is elected, the Republican Party and its lawmakers, if not other American leaders, will surely

“control” his erratic and uninformed impulses. But to date, none of these leaders has done so, and given Trump’s self-absorption and hubris, it is by no means clear that they could do so, even if they were so inclined. Indeed, there is much evidence they could not. In any event, they have not demonstrated any pronounced proclivity to do so. The same must be said of many other GOP leaders, including many of the candidates who originally opposed Trump for the Party’s nomination, despite the fact that several of them rightly pointed to his erratic behavior, narcissism and tendency to embrace autocratic strategies during the primary campaign. It is especially noteworthy, then, that some Republican leaders, including former Presidents George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush, have indicated they will not vote for Trump. This fact represents an indictment of a special sort of the Party’s current leadership.

Another common argument among the businessman’s supporters is to contend that they want “change” because American governance is not working, and although Trump is a risk, he will bring fresh thinking to the White House that will set matters on a more appropriate path. This contention, too, suffers under scrutiny. First, Trump has demonstrated he is not controllable, as already noted, so the posited risk is not simply present and manageable, but untenable. This is a man who has demonstrated that he possesses no knowledge of American nuclear policy and other vital topics, and who has embraced a dictator as a model leader, to be preferred to the current legitimately elected President of the United States. Second, this view falters when one asks just what needs to be changed in our nation’s governance, and Trump supporters point to the inability of Congress to do its job or to a range of conditions that simply do not exist. America’s unemployment rate is not 47 percent, as Trump has claimed, but 3.9 percent. Hordes of immigrants are not invading the nation and stealing jobs and committing crimes as he has also argued. In fact, immigration rates have fallen in recent years. Nonetheless, Trump has embraced and popularized these fallacious claims, among many other dark and mythic contentions. Supporters desiring change because Washington “does not work” should examine the behavior of their parties’ elected legislators and pressure those individuals to shift course, rather than support the election of a demagogue.

A share of Trump’s followers suggest they support him on the grounds that, should he be elected, he will nominate individuals of their ideological liking for the Supreme Court, and will advocate for issues they hold dear, such as abortion controls and “religious liberty.” However, since Trump has

been on all sides of these issues, and he is, in any case, a mercurial personality consumed principally with personal power and not with institutional actions and legitimacy, it is by no means clear that their faith that he will act as they might hope will be vindicated.

Another group of Trump followers apparently supports him on the grounds that he is their Party's nominal standard bearer and his victory will result in increased political power for their preferred party, and that fact will result in policies they favor. But, unfortunately for this view, Trump has been both a Republican and a member of the opposing party as suits his pursuit of influence and power. Moreover, it is never clear with any demagogue, and surely with Trump, that that individual will hew to anyone's partisan expectations, rather than to their own thirst for attention and power. In short, in this very unusual election, there is substantial reason to believe that this traditional sort of claim will not hold in November.

In any case, the real question should not be whether the Republican Party or its elites will gain a short-term electoral advantage by his possible election, but what the effects of electing a demagogue President of the United States are likely to be, and those could be more than consequential to say the least. Any discussion of this fact has thus far not entered the public lexicon of the Party's present leaders, however, despite many others in the GOP publicly raising concerns about Trump for this reason.

These arguments point not to partisan differences between Democrats and Republicans, notwithstanding the false equivalence accorded the candidates by too many in the media throughout this campaign, but to the question of what grounds many Americans might be using as a touchstone to consider their vote. It is worth repeating, this is not a question of partisanship or whether one likes or dislikes Trump's opponent Hillary Clinton or her policies, but a question of the GOP nominee's repeatedly demonstrated behavior and character. Indeed, what seems to be lacking among Trump's supporters, irrespective of their arguments for him, is evidence of genuine deliberation.

Self-governance demands that citizens self-consciously and prudently consider their choices. This is so whether one understands it as deliberative democracy, which requires a modicum of civic virtue in the citizenry writ large, or as democratic deliberation via small cadres or groups of citizens reasoning together to preserve their freedom and to seek policies in their collective interest via those they elect to positions of public trust. On the evidence of the current level of support for Trump, in lieu of either of

these, many citizens have instead succumbed to his demagoguery. whether motivated to do so by his race baiting, national chauvinism, misogyny, conspiratorial claims, supposed partisanship, perceived material success or other grounds.

Sadly, it has always been so with demagogues and self-governance. The Founders vigorously debated whether American institutions should be grounded in classical Republicanism, which tended to require that political leaders and citizens love the common good for its own sake and act accordingly, even against their own self-interests to protect against tyranny. They also considered the alternative of rooting the new nation in a hope that officials and voters could press for their self-interests, while nevertheless recognizing the need to legitimize the capacity of others to do the same if freedom was to be maintained. Scholars continue to debate which of these conceptions, or their blending, best capture our Framers' thinking.

Contrary to the Founders' hopes, however one may wish to interpret them, and for a variety of reasons, we appear to be witnessing a heightened cynicism today among GOP elites particularly, concerning the citizens they serve. To this factor, one must add a restive population unwilling or perhaps unable to deliberate prudently about its choices, and a media environment conducive to demagoguery. The result of these strands has been the toxic rise of a vainglorious bombastic self-promoter who neither understands nor wishes to grasp why freedom is important and what it means to the people he has mobilized to the polls. The demagogue and the formal leaders of his Party appear united today in their quest for power, irrespective of its potential costs for freedom and self-governance in the United States and beyond. To say this situation is tragic is to understate its gravity.

(Originally published October 10, 2016)

87 A Demagogue Attacks American Governance

This presidential election season has in no sense been a “normal” one. It is the first in U.S. history of which I am aware in which a major political party chose a demagogue as its standard bearer, an individual who has repeatedly demonstrated his unfitness for the office for which he was nominated. In itself, this turn represents deep cause for concern in democratic terms, but that nominee, Republican Donald Trump, in keeping with his seemingly boundless vanity and willingness to hate, has employed a campaign rhetoric and discourse that has celebrated nativism, racism, misogyny and more. Indeed, he has attacked a host of groups in society and labeled each of his opponents with playground tags that his supporters have taken up as a sort-of accepted gospel according to their revered leader. And he has gone further still, seeming to call for the assassination of his opponent, Hillary Clinton, and most recently, following revelations that he had boasted about episodes of sexual assaults against women, he has offered comments on Clinton’s anatomy by way of a sideways attempted retribution for his current difficulties.

Ironically, all that remark did was call public attention once more to his often expressed sexism and misogyny. Meanwhile, a rising number of women continue to share publicly accusations that Trump had kissed or groped them against their will. Meanwhile, too, as his polls have tumbled in the wake of these ongoing revelations and some major GOP figures have (at long last) distanced themselves from him, Trump has sought to retaliate against all of these by attacking his accusers and declaring all such accounts untrue and the product of “unattractive” (another indicator of his unapologetic misogyny, were one needed) liars “and a vast conspiracy against him by the news media and Hillary Clinton’s campaign.”¹ And he has gone further, as *The New York Times* has reported:

Mr. Trump has spoken in ever more apocalyptic tones in recent days as his poll numbers have fallen: describing Mrs. Clinton as deserving incarceration; warning that the election will be rigged; and suggesting that international bankers are colluding to bring about his defeat.²

Indeed, he has indicated he would appoint a special prosecutor to ensure that Secretary Clinton “goes to jail” for infractions that he never articulates, except in the most general of terms. Likewise, Trump’s chilling allusion to an international financial cabal “rigging the election against him,” so eerily reminiscent of decades old anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, is both preposterous and deeply sad. It is now clear that this man, who appears likely to lose the coming national election, intends to do all he can to delegitimize the nation’s electoral process and American sovereignty in the eyes of his followers, even as he is electorally defeated. In the mind of this narcissist, it is simply impossible that a majority of Americans might not choose his racial and nativist rantings as a reasonable path for the country’s future. So it is that someone or something must be scapegoated for his personal and public failures and failings, and that now takes the guise of not only a vicious unfounded assault on Clinton, but also on United States governance as well.

And in a deeply discomfiting turn, the roughly 30 percent or so of the American electorate still standing with Trump support his completely baseless attacks on “the media” and “businesspeople” colluding with the Clinton campaign to “rig the election.” These voters have rationalized and explained away the real estate mogul’s apparent long-term willingness to engage in repeated assaults on women, his penchant for conspiracy and fear mongering and his policy ignorance, and have accepted at face value his claims that he would win office, but for the machinations of a secret group of conspirators conniving to prevent him from doing so. And, still more troubling, many of Trump’s followers go further than these hallucinatory rationalizations, suggesting in profoundly disturbing rhetoric that they are more than prepared to delegitimize their nation on his say so. As one Trump supporter told a *Boston Globe* reporter recently:

‘If she’s in office, I hope we can start a coup. She should be in prison or shot. That’s how I feel about it,’ Dan Bowman, a 50-year-old contractor, said of Hillary Clinton, the Democratic nominee. ‘We’re going to have a revolution and take them out of office if that’s what it takes. There’s going to be a lot of bloodshed. But that’s what it’s going to take. ... I would do whatever I can for my country.’³

This is vile nonsense rooted in lies and fear in a democratic nation supposedly committed to the rule of law, and it is the product of the imagination not of this misguided citizen alone, but of its instigator, Trump,

who appears bent on undermining the faith of his supporters in the country's democratic institutions. One may ask why he would take this course and, more importantly, why any American would follow him down it, but as significant as these questions may be, they are no longer the issue, as many citizens are plainly doing so. The concern now is the long-term political damage this manifestly unqualified individual is doing and will do to the nation in the remaining days of this campaign, since so many individuals have made it clear that they will accept virtually anything he may do and remain his followers.

In light of this situation, it seems appropriate to offer three central points. First, as many have rightly argued in recent days, the Republican Party's willingness to nominate and support formally (as it continues to do) a manifestly inexperienced figure who has so viciously attacked decency and civil and human rights alike throughout his campaign, should be a cause for deep soul searching on the part of that institution's leaders. That effort should not take the character, as it did in 2012, of "what can we do to attract more folks to our terrific message so we can win." Instead, it should be a meaningful reflection on the ideology that has underpinned and driven that orientation, and how it has fed the current fear-and hate-driven social movement Trump now leads. In particular, as Trump daily attacks the legitimacy of American democracy, a stance which some GOP leaders are now appropriately decrying, the Republican Party should consider the relationship between its decades-long attacks on democratic governance in favor of markets and its followers' willingness to esteem a demagogue. Likewise, the Party should reflect on its equally long-term embrace of race as a mobilizing tactic, its profoundly disingenuous current campaign to prevent certain individuals from voting and its decision to obstruct governance processes throughout the Obama presidency in the name of acquiring and maintaining power. Ironically, all of these GOP choices and more have fed the fear and anger of the Party's core group now supporting a rampaging demagogue over whom the GOP has lost all purview.

Second, both Democrats and Republicans in Congress need to stop playing to the least common denominators in their districts, i.e., their gerrymandered partisan bases, in January 2017 if they wish to have any hope of addressing the Republic's manifold challenges. This may be too much to ask in the face of recent history and the extremist beliefs of many of today's congressional leaders, but it is one of the few reeds on which the regime may

lean when so many of its sovereign are so willing to sully civil rights and risk freedom by embracing a charlatan.

Finally, lawmakers of all beliefs should unite, and soon, to make the case that freedom cannot survive without a realization among all citizens that all U.S residents are owed their civil and human rights, regardless of their race, creed, sexual orientation, gender, national origin or any other characteristic. Our nation's political leaders should also remind their constituents that all who enter our nation as its guests or would-be citizens should be accorded the same dignity and respect that they expect as Americans.

Failing progress on at least the issues outlined here, it is unclear how deep the impact of Trump's demagoguery and his willing followers ultimately may be on America's democratic experiment. But, if the consequences of Trump's anti-democratic movement cannot be known with surety now, history nonetheless teaches that they are unlikely to be positive. Dan Bowman, the Trump supporter quoted above, provides ample evidence of that ominous fact.

(Originally published October 24, 2016)

Notes

¹ Burns, Alexander and Nick Corasanti. 2016. "Donald Trump Assails his Accusers as Liars, and Unattractive," *The New York Times*, October 14. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/15/us/politics/donald-trump-campaign.html?emc=edit_th_20161015&nl=todaysheadlines&nliid=40087534&r=0.

² Burns and Corasanti, "Donald Trump Assails his Accusers."

³ Viser, Matt and Tracy Jan. 2016. "Trump's Supporters talk Rebellion, Assassination at his Rallies," *The Boston Globe*, October 15. Available at: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2016/10/15/donald-trump-warnings-conspiracy-rig-election-are-stoking-anger-among-his-followers/LcCY6e0QOcfH8VdeK9UdsM/story.html>.

88 Electoral Carnage, American Style

There is apparently nothing that Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump will not do or say to sully the nation and its democratic politics, as he campaigns for election to its highest executive office. Consider the following claims he has embraced in recent days:

- He has continued to assert, with no evidence (because there is none), that a sinister conspiracy of the Hillary Clinton campaign and a cabal of international financiers are “rigging” the election against him
- He has argued, with no evidence (because there is none), that Clinton should be impeached if she is elected, as if her election by the American people could not possibly be legitimate
- He has contended, with no evidence (because there is none), that the nation is awash in crime, with much of it committed by a sea of illegal immigrants
- He has suggested, with no evidence (because there is none to date, and very likely to be none that would justify anything like such a comparison), that the emails discovered on a laptop of the former spouse of a senior Clinton aide constitute a scandal “bigger than Watergate”
- In an obvious and ugly paean to racism, he has continued to claim, with no evidence (because there is none), that the polls must be watched by his supporters in America’s cities so that “Crooked Hillary” and her minions will not commit massive vote fraud and deny him election.

Unfortunately, it is easy to find signs of the damage these remarkable anti-democratic and authoritarian fantasies are creating. First, millions of Americans claim to believe him. That fact alone should give those who care about self-governance pause. Whatever their reasons, many voters are ready to cede their birthright of freedom to a pandering demagogue. Second, they not only believe him, but far from seeing him as the empty and unqualified individual he is, they place yard signs on their properties reading “Save freedom: Vote Trump-Pence.” If there is a better example of complete doublespeak in our current political milieu, I have not seen it. Trump, who

has shown no respect for the American Constitutional tradition and its democratic politics, and who has repeatedly and consistently lied on matters large and small, even as he revealed nearly complete ignorance of policy concerns, has apparently convinced many citizens he will preserve their freedom. The irony could not be richer or sadder. Third, a share of Americans has taken Trump up on his nativist and racist claims, as, apparently, did the perpetrators who fire bombed an African-American church in Mississippi in recent days and scrawled “Vote Trump” across the burning wreckage. Finally, far too many voters appear willing to continue to hold their government hostage to the nonsensical whims of a would-be demagogue should he not prevail in tomorrow’s election by pressing GOP leaders to do all they can to obstruct governance going forward, including continuing to refuse to fill the current vacancy on the Supreme Court.

It seems more than reasonable to ask how we collectively came to this pass as a people and nation. How can so many not only countenance, but actively embrace such profoundly delegitimizing and anti-democratic behavior on the basis of a foundation of lies, conspiracy mongering and scapegoating? At the risk of unduly simplifying a number of complex social trends, I offer a brief review, in no special order, of several of the most significant factors that together appear to have resulted in this dark turn for our national politics and our country more generally. Each must be addressed effectively by the American people and their political leaders, and soon, if these trends are not to inflict long-term damage on our governance institutions.

The Radicalization of the GOP

Dating at least to the mid-1990s and the “Contract with America,” the Republican Party has adopted an ever more strident core ideology that has often sought to hold governance and government legitimacy hostage to its political predilections. The Party’s leaders have demonstrated an increasing willingness to sacrifice even the possibility of governance and the common weal to the pursuit of power in the name of ideological belief. Such has now become a central strategy for the Party and is symbolized by Trump, whose narcissistic cruelty and capacity for bald-faced lies and fear-mongering in the name of acquiring power are without precedent in modern American politics.

The Rise of the Conservative Entertainment Complex

Another key trend in our country's politics has been the rise of conservative talk radio, internet and Fox News media figures who maintain their audiences and earn their salience and paychecks by mobilizing fear and engaging in angry diatribe and conspiracy claims regarding the supposed evils of those who possess political power and with whom they disagree. This industry has developed an out-sized influence in the Republican Party by capturing a significant following among its core supporters. These figures are accountable to nothing except the bottom-line and they have promoted all manner of delegitimizing claims and rhetoric, including countenancing Trump's absurd and unfounded argument that President Barack Obama was not a United States citizen, among many other fatuous contentions. As with Trump, there appear to be no limits to what they will contend and say in their efforts to garner ratings. Democratic probity and reasonableness as well as compromise come the cropper in this turn, as those who follow these media figures adopt their mantra and demand the same of GOP leaders.

Sophisticated Gerrymandering

Many political experts have noted that only approximately 31 of 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives were actually competitive this election season. This is so because the parties (and especially the GOP, which dominates state legislatures where the work is done) have so adroitly drawn the districts to favor their incumbents. This is a travesty for democracy and the realization of its premise of one-person-one-vote, and it works quite effectively to ensure that the most radical voters in each party will have a disproportionate role in campaigns and elections, and that those they elect are likely to hold views more conservative or progressive than the average American voter. This polarizing trend has made coalition building in Congress much more difficult as it has deepened, even as it has given incumbents more job security and less incentive to compromise and more to grandstand and posture to their base voters.

False Equivalence

Even as a right-wing entertainment industry has arisen in recent decades, the remainder of the media establishment has for far too long been willing to countenance fabrications and worse from policy-makers on the view that "voters can decide" for themselves who is reasonable and hold them appropriately accountable. The present campaign has revealed the dangers of this course. Journalism should be about ensuring an informed public and

not simply parroting the often outrageous fabrications of partisans. Trump has revealed how problematic this stance can be as he has rallied GOP voters on the basis of completely specious claims about crime, vote rigging, his opponent's alleged criminality, immigration and much more, and these have been treated by many media outlets as if they were real options and issues. What is now clear is that amidst the many competing media establishments and forms of information that Americans access each day, simply saying something over and over, however shameful and untrue, will convince some of its truth. Trump is surely a master of this form of demagoguery. The media must take steps to prevent its continued use as a megaphone for democratic malignance.

The media must also address a variant of this concern. Trump has been treated as an equal to Clinton and his often horrific and uninformed stands have been given a gravity equivalent to her far more considered policy plans (whether one agrees with them in every particular or not). In fact, he knows little and is a classic fear-monger. In truth, Americans effectively have one candidate who respects our Constitutional tradition and one who has promised to behave as an authoritarian leader and to trample on civil liberties, due process and human rights in a variety of ways. Whether one likes Clinton or not, she is not a demagogue and has not promised repeatedly to degrade our nation's democracy or worked actively to delegitimize its institutions, as her opponent has done.

Post-Truth Politics

Donald Trump has ushered in a new turn in American politics of shameless lying. He has asserted untruths over and over again, and as noted above, many in the media have treated those as the equivalent of the more substantive stands of some of his primary opponents and of his general election opponent, Hillary Clinton. They are not. They are often complete fabrications designed to appeal to fear or prejudice or worse. But in our canalized media world in which many live in social media bubbles, Trump has convinced large numbers of individuals of many false claims. Worse, in many cases, those assertions are not only untrue, but they have also served to delegitimize our institutions, as in his demonization of Clinton, his statements about President Obama's citizenship and his many claims about Mexico paying for a wall on our country's border with that nation, among too many others to recount here. It is not clear how democracy can survive a continuous politics of false claims aimed not only at opponents, but also

designed to sow distrust in self-governance. But such is the scenario the nation now confronts as its citizenry heads to the polls tomorrow.

These trends are more than discomfiting and they suggest that every vote will count in this year's election. All eligible Americans should vote and should send a clear message they are weary of demagoguery and power-mongering, and they demand an end to faux populist authoritarian claims. I frankly have been dismayed by how many voters have written or said they would "sit this one out" as they did not like either candidate. This behavior is always unacceptable in a democracy, but never more so than now, when our regime values are under active attack by a demagogue and his supporters. I think of the women in Afghanistan who endured beatings and many hours of standing in line to cast their vote just two years ago, and I marvel that so many people in the United States would abandon their franchise so lightly to those who support a charlatan. This nation deserves better. Whatever the outcome tomorrow, one must hope that GOP and Democratic leaders will demonstrate the courage to govern, rather than to obscure, pillory and engage in all manner of disingenuous ploys in the name of power. They must address the trends outlined here in a careful and open way if the wounds inflicted by this campaign and the politics that led to it are to be healed and our democratic way of life is to continue with some hope of vitality.

(Originally published November 7, 2016)

89 A Nest of Paradoxes

This *Soundings* finds me musing on the presidential election and Donald Trump's unexpected victory in the Electoral College. I make that distinction because he actually lost the national popular vote to Hillary Clinton. So, for the second time in 16 years and the sixth in our nation's history, we have a President-elect who was not the preference of the majority of Americans voting in the election. That fact is but one of many that journalists, scholars and analysts alike have been pondering as they seek to make sense of this electoral outcome. This election highlighted a number of paradoxes and it has elicited a host of equally paradoxical explanations from those seeking to make sense of it. Here is a sampling:

Economic distress drove the election and those voting for Trump did so in a sort of primal scream against globalization.

This claim is surely partly true. Many of Trump's supporters come from economically hard-hit areas, but paradoxically, most are not themselves suffering economic duress. Moreover, many of Trump's voters view those who are in distress in their hard-hit communities with contempt. Oddly too, the GOP has fought hard not to provide needed governmental assistance to these communities on the argument that such support will nurture their "dependence" on public aid. These are paradoxes of the highest order.

Social change drove these voters to Trump. Growing gender equality, same-sex marriage and concerns about the decline of organized religion and the traditional family created frustration and caused Trump's voters to accept his authoritarian claims that he alone could "fix" these issues.

While I do not doubt that the values clash on these concerns is real, I am not persuaded that those citizens lamenting the changes in family composition and dynamics have not themselves participated in furthering the shifts they now purport to resent. More, such worries, valid expressions of values though they may be, do not justify voting for a demagogue who offered no specific suggestions for how their concerns might be addressed. I cannot explain this paradox and have seen no adequate explanation for it to date.

Donald Trump was never *really* a demagogue and he never *actually* meant his now infamous diatribes on the electoral system being fixed, the character of immigrants and Muslims as a class and too many others to recount here. Nor, did he *really* mean to lie so flagrantly and so often about so many issues. He will behave differently now that he has won office. Moreover, his advisors will rein in his worst tendencies.

Well, perhaps, but the problem with this argument is that rhetoric matters, and in this case it galvanized millions to embrace hatred and rationalize overt racism, misogyny and xenophobia, among other of Trump's tropes and lies. I, at least, will not soon forget video footage of Trump rallies at which his supporters were seen screaming "Sieg Heil" and "Lock her Up" and much worse. As I write, it is not clear that, even if Trump's rhetoric was all for "show" to gain power, the President-elect can contain the evil genie he and his Party have unleashed. His was a full-throated cry against heterogeneity that embraced vilification of the "other." White nationalism was surely one factor at play among his supporters in the election. Many of that number proved willing to overlook his many obvious lies in its name. How this could be so remains something of a mystery. But in no case did his advisors prevent him from pursuing the course he did and a share of his most important aides actually outdid him in the outrageousness of their claims in the public square.

Trump's election is the fault of the elites in the Democratic Party. If they had not viewed the voters of the Midwest, particularly, with such condescension and even contempt, their Party would have triumphed.

Once again, maybe, but this contention imagines that voters would embrace a demagogue out of anger at elites who were not running in the race, and would accept policy positions (dismantling the national health insurance support program, for example) that will materially hurt millions of them, in a fit of pique over a supposed social phenomenon of which many of those supposedly affected were not likely aware. I am not willing to imagine voters are so utterly undiscerning. In addition, the rural/city divide and rural mistrust of "cosmopolitan urbanites" is as old as the nation. The same can be said of anti-intellectualism in our country. Trump surely played on both in his campaign and both played roles in this election, but paradoxically,

rural residents suspected urbanites at least as much as analysts arguing that Democratic Party elites disliked those residents. Which came first? The chicken or the egg? Or is the issue here that Trump and the GOP successfully exploited the same, regardless of its origins?

GOP voter suppression efforts were successful in specific battleground states, as the African-American voter turnout was down compared to 2012.

This may have been one factor, as the GOP sought systematically in many states it controls to achieve just such a result, but the matter is not yet clear as analysts sort the evidence of an election in which just 27 percent of the voting eligible population cast a ballot for Trump, and less than 57 percent of all registered voters nationwide participated in the election. Nonetheless, it could also be that Clinton was not as attractive a candidate to this group of voters as President Obama proved to be or, indeed, both of these factors and the obvious broader lack of political engagement could have been at play. In any case, this argument does not explain why working-class white voters voted for Trump in unprecedented numbers in key Electoral College states.

I could expand this list, and comment on FBI Director James Comey's role in the days prior to the vote, but the arguments already presented suffice to highlight just how muddy our understanding of voter choices in this election remains. This said, two facts do seem clear. First, Donald Trump is our President-elect and second, he gained that office with textbook demagoguery, and that fact cannot simply be forgotten in a simplistic drive to "normalize" him as a key figure in American governance. So, the nation's citizenry is now confronted with a difficult overarching paradox: How can it honor its institutions while also holding the soon to be chief executive accountable for the country's devotion to equality and freedom for all? That is indeed the central paradox of this paradox filled election season.

Interestingly, Canadian singer, songwriter and poet Leonard Cohen, who died on the eve of our election day, may have provided food for thought on this count in one of the songs, "It Seemed the Better Way," on his final album, *You Want it Darker*, released just days before his death. In that song/poem, Cohen reflected on the frailty of human choices and the decisions and behavioral changes in turn that must be made to allow judgments to be set right when those go awry. Here is an excerpt of that haunting lyric:

It seemed the better way / When first I heard him speak / Now it's
much too late / To turn the other cheek / Sounded like the truth
/ Seemed the better way / Sounded like the truth / But it's not the
truth today

I wonder what it was / I wonder what it meant / First he touched on
love / Then he touched on death / Sounded like the truth / Seemed
the better way / Sounded like the truth / But it's not the truth today

...

I better hold my tongue / I better take my place / Lift this glass of
blood / Try to say the grace.¹

My sense as I reflect is, that like the protagonist in this song, all Americans must now move forward together with hope to heal the wounds of a heedlessly venal campaign—to hold their collective tongue—and to support President Trump and his Republican congressional majority when they further the American Constitutional tradition—to “lift this glass of blood [and] try to say the grace.” Likewise, they should oppose these leaders strongly should they seek, as in so much of the campaign, to discriminate and to deny civil and human rights to any group (to include Trump’s outrageous call for the reinstatement of torture). President-elect Trump and the GOP Congress surely deserve no less and no more from a self-governing people. The question will be whether the new chief executive can now learn to play his role in the nation’s governance with empathy, hope and deliberation in the name of all the nation’s people, even as the population whose divisions he has willfully exploited to gain power—supporters and opponents alike—must discipline itself to do the same. Democratic governance now hangs on whether and how President-elect Trump, the Republican congressional majority and our society addresses this challenge.

(Originally published November 16, 2016)

Notes

¹ Cohen, Leonard. 2016 “It Seemed the Better Way,” on *You Want it Darker*. Leonard Cohen, Columbia/Legacy Catalog Number: 536507. CD.

90 Defining Democratic Legitimacy Down

The nation has lately been treated to a discussion between many of President-elect Donald Trump's supporters and the majority of Americans who did not vote for him in the recent election, with the former regaling the latter with assertions such as the following:

- Get over it; we won.
- You are a bunch of namby-pambies trying to protect a share of U.S. residents and citizens from the truths that the President-elect neatly brought to the fore.
- We are sick of your arrogant "political correctness."
- President-elect Trump was telling it like it is during the campaign.

This election was a referendum on President Barack Obama or, as *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd has reported her brother, Kevin, contended at his family's recent Thanksgiving dinner:

The election was a complete repudiation of Barack Obama: his fantasy world of political correctness, the politicization of the Justice Department and the I.R.S., an out-of-control E.P.A., his neutering of the military, his nonsupport of the police and his fixation on things like transgender bathrooms.¹

It is fascinating that these statements set aside any reasoned arguments in favor of ad hominem and absolutist attacks that are largely unconnected to reality. This listing does not reveal an inventory of factual concerns. Noting the last point, the current President's public approval rating sits at 55 percent, and he was not on the ballot. As such, this election was certainly not a personal repudiation of President Obama. Instead, this argument amounts to a fantasy critique that simply asserts grievances that reflect, not the purported broad popular opinion it invokes, but ideological dogma. There is no real evidence for any of Kevin Dowd's assertions and he provides none, but among many core GOP supporters, they are accepted as something approaching gospel.

For example, Dowd's statements concerning the Justice Department ignore the fact that FBI Director James Comey acted independently to reopen an investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server during her government service, just days before the election, when, for a second time, he publicly announced he had found no prosecutable wrongdoing. So much for the Justice Department "rigging" anything for the incumbent Party's candidate or the Department being out of control in its efforts to advance Democratic Party interests.

While the particulars of this sort of rhetoric, regardless of who voices it, almost always echo the same basic talking points that are widely shared in GOP and conservative discourse, they point to three larger questions that will continue to shape American self-governance into the foreseeable future.

First, they do not reflect a reasoned analysis of the concerns they supposedly treat. That is, they assert a code of belief and demand its acceptance rather than provide an assessment of whether their contentions make rational sense. These sorts of arguments represent a form of "post-truth" politics that is not characterized by deliberate falsification or lies—as so frequently occurred in the Trump campaign, and which is continuing during the President-elect's transition—but a distorted sense of reality that arises from a desire to believe that governance, and especially one's opponents or selected scapegoats, are the source of all of what one perceives to be one's personal challenges or social woes.

Second, this sort of rhetoric reveals a continuing willingness to delegitimize specific government officials and institutions without evidence, and to do the same regarding governance more broadly. Kevin Dowd chose to impugn President Obama specifically, as well as multiple government institutions, but, taken together, his rhetoric constitutes an attack on civil rights and on the legitimacy of governance itself.

Third, and related to the first point above, the concerns listed are not actual evocations of what is alleged, but revelations of a mindset that is willing to embrace shrill shibboleths and to contend that one's personal imaginings are really the ugly arrogance of a reviled "other." For example, there is no evidence that President Obama is fixated on "neutering the military" or on "transgender bathrooms," but there is much data that shows these false claims have been used quite effectively as mobilizing devices by the GOP. These allegations are projections or proxies for anxiety and concern about global and social change and not empirical statements framed for deliberative debate. Indeed, they bear almost no relationship to reality.

And that is the nub of the matter. Many Trump supporters and some journalists have spent the period since the election arguing that no one should take the President-elect's rhetoric (and that of his supporters) "literally," but instead should take his contentions "seriously." But this postulated distinction misses two fundamental points and is ultimately meaningless. First, much of Trump's rhetoric has been and continues to be untruthful and/or vile. It is difficult to imagine what to take "seriously" when the President-elect alleges that more than 2 million people voted illegally in our national election, and when he makes that statement on the basis of no evidence whatsoever and out of apparent personal pique that he did not win the national popular vote. Or how to interpret his malignant attacks on veterans who endured torture for their nation or gave up their lives in its service. And so on. This argument not to take his words literally appears ultimately to be a simplistic willingness to rationalize Trump's often wildly inappropriate, divisive and even abusive behavior.

Secondly, this supposed "literal-serious" distinction robs the electorate of any genuine capacity to debate policy or political ideas. Citizens are instead asked continuously to read the tea leaves of Trump's assaults on the truth and on various groups to ascertain what his allegedly "serious" message might be within them. And this always occurs after the fact and as the product of "reinterpretation" and sense-making by those with a vested interest in "spinning" his actions and behavior.

Why any of this makes sense to its proponents frankly eludes me, and it is easy to conclude that it simply excuses continued exploitation of popular fears and prejudices to garner power, even as it makes a mockery of serious deliberative dialogue. Those on all sides are now being asked to imagine what the latest lie or misleading rhetorical flourish signals and to do so without benefit of any relationship of those contentions to the truth or reality in many cases. So, we have entered a period in which Trump's supporters are apparently prepared to explain and accept anything he might suggest and to live within a mythology of their own creation that "others" self-governance and any who are different or dare oppose them as *prima facie* "arrogant" and contemptible. As *Washington Post* columnist Margaret Sullivan has written recently:

It's time to dust off your old copy of 1984 by George Orwell and recall this passage: 'The Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war, the Ministry of Truth with lies, the Ministry of Love with torture

and the Ministry of Plenty with starvation. These contradictions are not accidental, nor do they result from ordinary hypocrisy: they are deliberate exercises in doublethink.' And be vigilant.²

Should these trends continue, and there seems no reason to believe they will not, we may expect a continued political polarization in which people of good will remain confused concerning whether or how to legitimate their nation's chief executive and how to interpret his actions as he systematically misleads, lies and worse on an almost daily basis in ways that broker social division and exploit prejudice and anxiety of all sorts. This profoundly anti-democratic situation is a recipe for the continued enervation of popular belief in democratic politics, even as it looks set to institutionalize a political "dialogue" emptied of all markers of civility and deliberation. The President elect's supporters will continue to fantasize, for example, that government, and not urbanization and globalization, have created economic dislocation for many citizens, and otherwise blame specific groups for ongoing economic and social change.

Indeed, as is rapidly occurring in much of the post-election conversation and evidenced by Dowd's portrait of what "really" happened in the campaign, Trump's supporters and the GOP will rationalize all actions the President-elect may undertake as "serious" symbols of his desire to address these distorted concerns. More, no one will be able to understand just what those steps mean until after the President has disparaged a group or shared yet another conspiratorial claim or lie encouraging the undermining of the civil rights of a share of Americans. Or, after he has gone further to malign a group or political institution in the name of personal power and a fantasy dogma that imagines that targeted "others" are the architects of all personal and social anxiety.

Our Republic now confronts an increasingly cynical politics of winner-take-all viciousness characterized by a near absolute unwillingness among millions of people to accept responsibility for their governance, and a companion willingness among a share of our political leaders, including, particularly, our President-elect, to demonize groups and degrade basic civil rights in the name of projected fears. Persistently rationalized by supporters, other citizens and the media alike and left uninterrupted, this is a recipe for the continued evanescence of the values for which this nation has long stood, and for self-governance itself.

(Originally published December 5, 2016)

Notes

¹ Dowd, Maureen. 2016. "Election Therapy from my Basket of Deplorables," *The New York Times*, November 26. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/opinion/sunday/election-therapy-from-my-basket-of-deplorables.html>.

² Sullivan, Margaret. 2016. "The Post-Truth World of the Trump Administration is Scarier than you Think," *The Washington Post*, December 2. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-post-truth-world-of-the-trump-administration-is-scarier-than-you-think/2016/12/02/ebda952a-b897-11e6-b994-f45a208f7a73_story.html.

91 A Tale of Democratic Political Frailty, Fractiousness and Human Dignity

The Institute for Policy and Governance's faculty and staff have long been interested in the services the Commonwealth provides its citizens with disabilities, whether those characteristics are physical or mental in character, or both. We have, for example, developed analyses of a share of the state's programs for military veterans with disabilities as well as of its facilities for those with disabilities residing in long-term care situations. Unfortunately, Virginia does not have a track record of providing generous support to these individuals and their families. In this regard, the state has treated such citizens no differently than other minority groups who reside within it, including, especially, African Americans, who have historically been the target of overt discrimination and neglect by Commonwealth policy-makers. This propensity reflects a deeper and uglier democratic current that has been much in evidence lately in state, national and international politics alike: discriminatory exploitation of demographic difference to gather or ensure political power.

One of the most obvious issues in the 2016 presidential campaign was President-elect Donald Trump's frequent violations of a variety of long-standing democratic norms. Those breaches often took the form of attacks on specific groups of people. In addition to those with disabilities, Trump mocked African Americans, women, journalists and immigrants and those who had been tortured as prisoners of war, among other groups, while also calling for renewed broadscale U.S. use of torture. The overarching question his behavior raised was whether publicly adopted democratic values of respect for human and civil rights, civility and equal treatment of all could withstand a continued onslaught of demagogic rhetoric.

Unfortunately, Trump's behavior is not an isolated phenomenon. The United States is hardly alone just now in experiencing a fresh fierce popular backlash among a share of its population that has shown itself willing to discriminate against minorities in its midst and to disregard long-established principles of civic behavior to alleviate its felt anxieties. The sordid treatment by the GOP presidential candidate of people with disabilities in particular

highlighted the fragility of their long-fought efforts to secure their civil rights and recognition of their innate human dignity. Trump's public display of cruelty likewise illuminated this population's general dependence on community support to secure living conditions that allow them to maximize their abilities, whatever those might be.

The social questions exposed by Trump's callousness and callowness during the campaign are not new. Individuals with disabilities have historically been mistreated and denied their human and democratic rights in this nation. Indeed, genuine breakthroughs in laws guaranteeing their rights as human beings and citizens in the United States did not occur until the 1960s, and social attitudes have shifted even more slowly than has the law. The battle to secure some semblance of equality and dignity in policy and in social norms and mores for citizens with disabilities in America has been long and tortuously difficult. In addition, that struggle has been rendered more arduous by the nation's adoption of neoliberal norms since the 1970s, which encourage weighing everything against its possible market value. For the relatively large share of people with disabilities who cannot work or who can be employed only with support in poorly compensated positions, this perspectival yardstick implies inferior or sharply diminished social standing. Such attitudes, coupled with increasingly successful appeals to popular prejudice and efforts to "other" minorities by Trump and other political leaders, diminish the impetus to office holders to ensure that individuals with disabilities receive needed services.

In many ways, the struggle to realize legal and social equality for those with disabilities parallels the fight for such status by African Americans. As with that group, the issue has never been the realization of statutory claims alone, but securing the social change that must support legal standing if those legislative strictures are ever fully to be realized. Many states today, for example, have imposed voter identification restrictions, which disproportionately adversely affect African Americans, precisely to prevent them from voting. This has occurred in the name of cynically pressed and empirically non-existent assertions of voter fraud, despite statutes guaranteeing voting and civil rights. That this phenomenon is occurring and that such initiatives continue more than 50 years after passage of national civil and voting rights guarantees, is chilling testimony to how difficult it is to cement social change.

It will always be tempting for would-be demagogues to use the differences evident among members of minority groups, including those with

disabilities, to demonize and belittle such individuals to galvanize political support, as indeed, Trump did during the campaign. Such othering will ever be built on perceived difference and can find its way into discriminatory policy-making and implementation in subtle ways. I here examine briefly the case of the state's ongoing treatment of Virginians with disabilities as an example of this larger phenomenon.

In Virginia, for citizens with disabilities, this tendency has revealed itself in sustained reluctance by lawmakers to ensure such individuals' civil rights and political equality. In fact, the Commonwealth moved so slowly to provide community-based living options for its residents with disabilities, as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and other laws, that the Department of Justice finally sued to prompt state action in 2010. Virginia settled the suit by entering into a consent decree in 2012 agreeing to take steps to remedy its long-term neglect to provide such services to this population.¹

And, indeed, the state has provided the decree's stipulated required funding (\$112 million) slowly to address the 11,000-person backlog of legally eligible individuals with disabilities who are not now receiving community-based services in the Commonwealth, decreasing that logjam by some 4,000 persons by 2021.² That increased support which, notably, will reduce the backlog by only 36 percent during the next five years, nonetheless leaves Virginia ranked in the lowest tier of such compensation/aid among the 50 states, despite the Commonwealth's relative wealth.³ Moreover, these new funds have arrived with a perverse twist for many already receiving services. Virginia has adopted an assessment of individual needs called the Supports Intensity Scale (variants are now also used in 22 other states) that seeks to determine how independently those with disabilities can function in their daily lives, and on the basis of that judgment, provide only such aid for helpers and direct support as those individuals may "actually" require. This process has not resulted in continued legislatively supported increases in funding to support community-based services that Virginia chose not to offer for decades. Instead, and apparently increasingly, it has led to "assessment determinations" that are reducing *existing* aid for individuals already receiving support. This is all occurring in the name of efficiency, and families are not allowed to appeal outcomes on behalf of their loved ones on substantive grounds.⁴

On its face, this may sound reasonable and appropriate until one asks why *any* of the people presently receiving assistance should lose support

when the relevant policy concern is not *their* aid, but assistance for individuals too-long denied it. The answer, program efficiency rhetoric notwithstanding, is that these people are a politically vulnerable population that can be so treated. What seems to be occurring in practice is that the Commonwealth intends to minimize what it must expend to comply with the consent decree it signed with the Federal Government to address its long-term unwillingness to sustain this population by reducing its already comparatively low support for current program service recipients wherever it can, and using those funds to help to trim its long wait list of those eligible for services.

As I noted above, this specific Virginia case provides an example of a cultural and very democratic propensity to reflect the general citizenry's ignorance and prejudices in governance by *de facto*, if not *de jure*, "othering" those perceived as "different" in its midst. While Trump drew on this human inclination to mobilize voters around abstract negative images of groups he scapegoated, in enacted policy it tends to operate in a subtler fashion via a routine disinclination to abide by statutory commitments and by a continual reluctance to provide the services necessary to secure the legal and civil rights and political equality of those targeted. More particularly, as here, this willingness to deny others their rights typically is built on social attitudes and rationalizations that "they are not like us" and therefore unworthy of public support.

What is lost in this rhetorical shuffle are the very real needs of these individuals, their status and rights as members of the democratic community and most importantly, their human dignity. There is no question that Virginia has the financial wherewithal to provide robust support for its citizens with disabilities and their families, but it has long elected not to do so and this lack of political will is rooted finally and firmly in a discriminatory impulse that those requiring aid are "other."

In his recent campaign, Trump chose to employ divisive and dismissive rhetoric aimed at this ugly human disposition to hate the other in his attacks, and the Republican Party has repeatedly shown itself capable, in the name of the pursuit or maintenance of political power, of working to undermine the civil rights of those it fears will not support it at the ballot box. As Anne Frank memorably wrote, "There is in people simply an urge to destroy, an urge to kill, to murder and rage."⁵ In such situations, citizens who realize the primal significance of human rights to self-governance and the preservation of freedom must persistently protest when lawmakers and their political

parties refuse to work to realize the aspirations of extant law or otherwise work actively to undermine the rights of a share of the citizens they represent—on whatever grounds. Human beings possess a boundless capacity for hate and depravity, and individuals who wish to preserve self-governance and human rights must be ever vigilant if they are to ensure that popular assaults on these fundaments predicated on that capacity are not successful.

(Originally published January 3, 2017)

Notes

- ¹ The Americans with Disabilities Act, website. No date. Available at: <https://www.ada.gov/>; https://www.ada.gov/olmstead/documents/virginia_consent_order.htm
- ² Olivo, Antonio. 2016. “Expanded Disability Aid Plan could cut Individual Services,” *The Roanoke Times*, December 24, Virginia, p.1.
- ³ United Cerebral Palsy, “The Case for Inclusion, 2015.” Available at: http://cfi.ucp.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/UCP_2015_CaseforInclusion_FINAL.pdf, p.9
- ⁴ Olivo, “Expanded Disability Aid Plan could cut Individual Services,” p.6.
- ⁵ Muller, Melissa. 1998. *Anne Frank: The Biography* (Revised and Expanded Edition), New York: Bloomsbury, p. 334.

92 Bullying, Derision and Democracy Make Poor Bedfellows

On Sunday evening, January 8, 2017, the Hollywood Foreign Press Association honored the distinguished American actress Meryl Streep with its highest accolade for lifetime achievement in the cinematic arts, the Cecil B. DeMille award. Characteristically, she chose to shine the spotlight elsewhere in her acceptance speech and her brief remarks sharply illuminated a major issue now confronting American democracy and politics. The comments that have garnered so much attention follow:

But there was one performance this year that stunned me. It sank its hooks in my heart. Not because it was good; there was nothing good about it. But it was effective and it did its job. It made its intended audience laugh, and show their teeth. It was that moment when the person asking to sit in the most respected seat in our country imitated a disabled reporter. Someone he outranked in privilege, power and the capacity to fight back. It kind of broke my heart when I saw it, and I still can't get it out of my head, because it wasn't in a movie. It was real life. And this instinct to humiliate, when it's modeled by someone in the public platform, by someone powerful, it filters down into everybody's life, because it gives permission for other people to do the same thing. Disrespect invites disrespect, violence incites violence. And when the powerful use their position to bully others we all lose.¹

Streep never mentioned Donald Trump by name in her reflection, but all in her audience surely, if not all in America, were familiar with his willingness—in the recent presidential campaign and since—to “other” specific groups in his efforts to mobilize a constituency around shared fear, mockery and bullying. The incident to which Streep specifically alluded found Trump ridiculing the chronic disabling condition of a *New York Times* reporter during a November 25, 2015, speech in South Carolina. Trump's “performance” was ugly and it did indeed elicit his desired derisive laughter from his audience. He made a habit of such attacks on the dignity and civil

rights of those different from himself, or those who dared to disagree with him during the campaign.

Streep was on firm ground as she reminded her audience that such actions demean not only those targeted, but those who undertake them and all who tolerate or encourage such ignorant hate. She was correct, too, to note that, more deeply, such actions simply cannot be countenanced in a diverse democracy that purports to accord equal standing to all of its citizens, irrespective of their skin color, gender, national origin or any other characteristic. In lieu of honoring this fundamental civil rights claim, Trump and his defenders have argued that not mocking and demeaning others constitutes “political correctness” since “saying what you mean is just plain honest talk.”

This is claptrap. Trump’s actions in South Carolina, and many times before and since, as he has attacked and sought to humiliate one group after another, have nothing to do with political correctness and everything to do with signaling to his supporters that it is OK, as Streep noted, to hate and disparage others on no other basis than the fact that their skin color or some other attribute is different from your own. All devotees of freedom must call this hate mongering what it is and call on the soon-to-be chief executive to stop threatening the civil liberties of all in the nation with his insistent willingness to employ such dark rhetoric.

Trump has sought, and continues to garner power, in part by unleashing anger and hate. While the incident to which Streep pointed was especially egregious, the President-elect has evidenced a continuing pattern of such behavior. Given his narcissism and thin skin, Trump always responds on social media to any perceived public criticism, and the viciously small character of those responses underscores the appropriateness of Ms. Streep’s comments. Here, for example, is how the President-elect addressed the acclaimed actress’s remarks on Twitter: “Meryl Streep, one of the most over-rated actresses in Hollywood, doesn’t know me but attacked last night at the Golden Globes. She is a Hillary flunky, who lost big.”²

So, it was that he chose to debase Streep personally while simultaneously puffing himself up in his response to her comments. In fact, Streep is widely and rightly celebrated for excellence in her occupation around the globe and no thoughtful analyst of whom I am aware has judged that standing undue. Her talent is enormous and she has demonstrated it over and over again on stage and in film and won many awards in that process. More, neither Clinton nor, certainly, Streep, “lost big,” but Trump constantly seeks

to aggrandize himself against others and demands obeisance to his claims of superiority. In truth, much of Trump's campaign, including his demeaning of *The Times* reporter with a disability, point to him as engaged in giving permission to his followers to release the bigot within them and to revile others different from themselves or who may have different views.

I now turn briefly to Trump's press conference last week, his first in many months. At that event, the President-elect refused to call on specific reporters as he assailed the legitimacy of their organizations as purveyors of "false news" or worse. These are the typical tactics of demagogues and they continue to corrode for his supporters both the idea that anyone independent of him can or should have legitimacy and standing in our politics, or that any view(s) other than his should be countenanced. This is dangerous, since freedom of speech and a free press are essential bulwarks of our democracy. Rather than acknowledge that fact, however, and submit his actions and proposed policies to vigorous public scrutiny and debate, Trump has instead repeatedly argued that all those who dare criticize his views or those he perceives as threatening for any reason are not legitimate and not to be trusted. These are not the actions of a leader interested in governing in a free society in a fashion aimed at ensuring that it remains so.

Finally, in keeping with this pattern of behavior, Trump has targeted U.S. Congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis (D-Georgia) with completely mendacious Twitter comments, following the legislator's comment on January 13 that evidence that Russia had influenced the election had convinced him not to attend Trump's inauguration and that he could not view him as a "legitimate President." In response, the President-elect offered the following post on Twitter, each element of which was false:

Congressman John Lewis should spend more time on fixing and helping his district, which is in horrible shape and falling apart (not to mention crime infested) rather than falsely complaining about the election results. All talk, talk, talk – no action or results. Sad!³

The President-elect's comments suggested he was apparently unaware of the character of Lewis' House district and that the congressman had endured multiple tear gas attacks and had his skull fractured in his decades of efforts to help African-American and other groups gain a semblance of equality in this nation.

Taken together, Streep's observation highlighting Trump's unprincipled willingness to "other" to gain power, his performance at his press event and his absurd attack on Lewis, whose "talk," as Senator Ben Sasse (R-Nebraska) rejoined on Twitter, "has changed the world," suggest an individual with little respect for civil liberties and the vital role they play in the protection of freedom and a shared social quest for equality or for those who entrusted him with the high office he will shortly assume.⁴ Rather, they remind one of the playground bully who gathers allies around the salacious demeaning of others perceived as outside the clan. This is dangerous stuff in a diverse polity and still more volatile when the targets are the standing and rights of specific groups in society as well as the freedom and legitimacy of the press.

If Trump's behavior is to be believed, and there seems no reason to imagine he will suddenly shift course when he assumes office in coming days, our nation is in for a dark time as its citizenry charts whether to follow a charlatan and demagogue, or instead seek ways to hold him accountable for his behavior and his trampling of democratic norms and Constitutional precepts alike. The Trump Presidency is hardly positioned for an auspicious start.

(Originally published January 17, 2017)

Notes

¹ Victor, Daniel and Giovanni Russonello, 2017. "Meryl Streep's Golden Globes Speech," *The New York Times*, January 8. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/08/arts/television/meryl-streep-golden-globes-speech.html>.

² Healy, Patrick. 2017. "Donald Trump Says He's Not Surprised by Meryl Streep's Golden Globes Speech," *The New York Times*, January 9. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/09/movies/trump-meryl-streep-golden-globes-speech.html>.

³ Taylor, Jessica. 2017. "Trump Attacks Civil Rights Hero Lewis as 'All Talk' After he Questions his Legitimacy," *National Public Radio*, January 14. Available at: <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/14/509834319/trump-attacks-civil-rights-hero-lewis-as-all-talk-after-he-questions-his-legitim?ft=nprml&f=1014>.

⁴ Taylor, "Trump Attacks Civil Rights Hero."

93 On the Misuse of Rhetoric and its Consequences for Democracy

One central issue of the nascent Trump presidency bedeviled journalists and analysts trying to make sense of his campaign for office: how to treat his frequently crude, callous and mendacious rhetoric that called on the broader citizenry to withdraw or fail to honor the civil or human rights of many Americans or United States residents. His comments often resulted in roars of delight from the crowds he addressed at campaign events. Just as frequently, these assertions prompted the media and commentators reporting them to express deep concern for what his words implied about the decline of democratic norms and the capacity of an empty and ignorant demagogue to be taken seriously by a share of the citizenry. David Brooks of *The New York Times* has lately mused about this issue and has suggested that the current cultural context of vast income and wealth inequality coupled with fear and anxiety about the future, as a result of globalization, helps to explain the carnival atmosphere that President Trump represents and that he exploited to gain office:

We're living with exactly the kinds of injustices that lead to carnival culture, and we've crowned a fool king. Donald Trump exists on two levels: the presidential level and the fool level. On one level, he makes personnel and other decisions. On the other he tweets. (I honestly don't know which level is more important to him.)

His tweets are classic fool behavior. They are raw, ridiculous and frequently self-destructive. He takes on an icon of the official culture and he throws mud at it. The point is not the message of the tweet. It's to symbolically upend hierarchy, to be oppositional.

The first problem with today's carnival culture is that there's an ocean of sadism lurking just below the surface. The second is that it's not real. It doesn't really address the inequalities that give rise to it. It's just combative display.

This is a resolution I'm probably going to break, but I resolve to write about Trump only on the presidential level, not on the carnival level.

I'm going to try to respond only to what he does, not what he says or tweets. I really wish some of my media confreres would do the same.¹

While it is easy to see the power of Brooks' analogy and to agree it is afoot, it is more difficult to discern how one might distinguish behavior from rhetoric, as he has sought to do. Indeed, rhetoric IS behavior, and to the extent Trump is the "fool king," he both embodies that role and represents its behavioral apotheosis. In short, I am unclear how one can distinguish behavior from rhetoric in any leadership role, let alone the Presidency. Trump has energized his followers by demeaning many groups and opponents, and a share of those same supporters have admired him for doing so. They have also accepted his explanation that his various alleged and admitted assaults on women were merely "locker room talk" and/or that none of the women who stepped forward to report his behavior actually endured the physical and emotional injury they reported. All of this suggests that his rhetoric is indeed eliciting supportive behavior among some while allowing Trump to do as he pleases and with pernicious consequences for civil and human rights; a condition Brooks would surely not countenance.

For all of these reasons, it is difficult to see how one can suggest that Trump's rhetoric is immaterial, as Brooks has sought to do. It is and has been material. And, thus far, his words have served, among other things, significantly to erode or attack democratic norms. For evidence, all one need cite are his continuing attacks on individuals who dare displease him, his untruthful daily assault on the freedom and legitimacy of the press and his baseless contention that millions of illegal voters cast ballots, depriving him of a victory in the nation's popular vote. Indeed, it is just this sort of ugly demagogic rhetoric that inflames and misleads at once that led the 17th century English political philosopher John Locke to suggest that *all* rhetoric should be held suspect and avoided. In his masterful *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke severely critiqued rhetoric, including the use of metaphor and imagination to convey meanings, as innately dangerous as they lead citizens away from deliberation:

But yet if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats: and

therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them. What and how various they are, will be superfluous here to take notice; the books of rhetoric which abound in the world, will instruct those who want to be informed: only I cannot but observe how little the preservation and improvement of truth and knowledge is the care and concern of mankind; since the arts of fallacy are endowed and preferred. It is evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputation: and I doubt not but it will be thought great boldness, if not brutality, in me to have said thus much against it. Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived.²

Locke had distinguished forebears in his suspicion of rhetoric. In *The Gorgias*, Plato reported Socrates' engagement with the ideas of a great rhetorician and Sophist of his day, Gorgias, in a supremely critical fashion. In that dialogue, Socrates suggested rhetoric is merely a sort of flattery and ignoble because it aims only to provide pleasure, rather than seek the welfare of the public.³ Socrates, through Plato, also argued that rhetoric, "is the artificer of a persuasion which creates belief about the just and unjust, but gives no instruction about them."⁴ Overall, as C. Francis Higgins has argued, "The character of Gorgias in the dialogue is forced to admit that his 'art' deals with opinion (*doxa*) rather than knowledge (*epistemê*); that its intention is to persuade rather than to instruct, and that rhetoric deals with language without regard to content."⁵

In short, both modern and ancient philosophers have contended that rhetoric can mislead, sometimes grotesquely, and therefore can result in harmful beliefs and behavior based on little more than empty declarations. For Locke, it led too often to a willingness among citizens to act on emotion, and therefore without prudence and with often deeply unfortunate consequences for human liberties. For Plato, rhetoric masked the truth,

leading to citizen embrace of the untoward and the unjust, even as it prompted those same individuals to misunderstand the reality they were confronting. For democracy, the harms to which these thinkers pointed have often taken the guise of an erosion of civil rights or freedom of some by others on the basis of appeals by one or more leaders to their unreason and emotion.

As students of both Plato and Locke, our Founders were aware of the dangers of the misuse of rhetoric as a way to mislead the citizenry and to inflame their passions, and they feared such behavior could result in the abuse of the rights of some individuals in its name. We now are witnessing the start of a presidency in which outright lies are a daily part of our collective experience. We are likewise waking to a president whose principal aim each day seems to be to inflate his standing in his own eyes by demeaning others through his public rhetoric. Moreover, his spokesperson, Sean Spicer, and senior advisor, Kellyanne Conway, recently held public press events following the inauguration at which each presented “alternative facts” of crowd size that day and protests the next day to those offered by media accounts. That is, each offered falsehoods aimed at obscuring and denying reality and at supporting Trump’s lies concerning these matters. Nonetheless, as Brooks has argued, Trump’s (and his staff’s) use of language in these efforts, however false, is adroit and offered with a straight face, and it continues to arouse and mislead many in the nation. All the more reason, then, that all other Americans and the nation’s press work assiduously to call him to account and to point up the falsity of the double speak and wild imaginings that are already the staple of his White House, and to demand that Trump provide reasons and accounts for his positions, and not simply employ poisonous or hateful rhetoric to change the subject or elicit emotion. In short, more than ever, citizens must constantly and persistently practice cool-headed analysis of Trump’s rhetoric and actions. The following statement, often attributed to George Orwell, appears an apt warning for Americans interested in preserving their freedom in this present moment of demagogic upheaval: “In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.”

(Originally published January 30, 2017)

Notes

¹ Brooks, David. 2017. “The Lord of Misrule,” *The New York Times*, January 17. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/17/opinion/the-lord-of->

[misrule.html](#).

² Locke, John. 1836. "Of the Abuse of Words," in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book III, London UK: T. Tegg and Son, Chapter X, pp. 372-373.

³ Jowett, Benjamin. 1937. *The Dialogues of Plato*, Vol.1, New York: Random House Publishers, p. 525.

⁴ Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, p. 513.

⁵ Higgins, C. Francis. "Gorgias," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/gorgias/>.

94 Lies, Legitimacy and Democratic Truths

The first weeks of the Trump presidency have demonstrated that several hypotheses analysts and apologists had advanced during the campaign to suggest that his constant lies, anti-democratic rhetoric and narcissistic temperament were not an issue were deeply mistaken. Among those were the following arguments:

- Some analysts claimed Trump really was not at “war” with the truth and the press as well as government institutions and would behave reasonably once in office.
- His dark Inaugural address, full of needless and heedless lies, his strange behavior concerning attendance at his Inaugural and the nation’s popular vote total, and his persistent and continuing untruths about immigration and massive illegal voting have demonstrated that those offering this canard had matters very wrong. Trump daily has worked as President, and his aides have also pressed assiduously as well, to convince broad swathes of the American citizenry that truth, other government institutions and a free press are their enemy, while what the President says should simply be accepted without analysis or debate. He has, for example attacked the federal courts and argued that the judiciary does not possess a right to question his judgments as expressed in executive orders, despite the Constitution’s embrace of separation of powers and more than 200 years of precedent to the contrary. In this view, offered repeatedly in recent days by key White House officials, Trump’s perspective, however fantastical, should be accepted unquestioningly for no other reason than that he said it. As for the President, he simply repeats his lies and attacks, ad nauseum, apparently aiming to press those he is addressing to accept his version of events out of sheer fatigue, or because they are weary of feeling besieged with invective should they dare continue to question his pronouncements. If this tactic sounds chillingly familiar, it should, and it should also raise alarm bells, as every modern autocratic demagogue has pursued a like strategy.
- Some suggested Trump was not serious when he offered broad

denunciations during the campaign aimed at scapegoating multiple groups, including individuals with disabilities, Latinos and those of the Islamic faith.

- His behavior once in office concerning his now infamous proposed border wall with Mexico and his cruel and ill-advised executive order banning travel and immigration from seven predominately Muslim nations and barring refugees from entering this country, have demonstrated these arguments were also patently false. To date in his presidency, Trump has behaved as an isolationist xenophobe who is willing to risk the civil rights and freedom as well as prosperity of his nation's citizens as he pursues his bleak vision of a country that must arm belligerently, build walls and hunker down in the face of global complexities.
- Some argued Trump did not “really” mean what he said when he spoke in angry and dystopian tones concerning the military (and overall) decline of America during the campaign, since that vision was verifiably false.
- Once President, Trump soon proved this claim wrong, too. In office, he has repeated those same false assertions and is proposing massive increases in spending for the Pentagon, which already receives more than \$600 billion per year, more than the total such expenditures of the next eight highest nations defense spending combined, and which had not sought large increases previously or argued the U.S. had fallen into strategic peril.
- Some contended during the campaign that even though he was not a blue-collar person of the sort to whom he sought to appeal, Trump would work to represent the interests of that constituency once in office, since his success would depend on their continued support.
- In fact, the President's mercantilism, erratic behavior and attack on the Dodd-Frank protections against market actor chicanery indicate he either does not care about the potentially very negative implications of these stands for those who voted for him, or is too uninformed to understand how badly his actions will hurt those who placed their faith in him. Neither of these possibilities inspires confidence or serves the needs of those who elected him.
- Trump's repeated embrace of torture, given the ignominy that now taints the George W. Bush administration's adoption of such illegal and immoral techniques, was all bluster to show his “toughness” in light of

his complete lack of government or military experience.

- The President has not disavowed torture and, in fact, supported it three separate times at an event with his Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, (who opposes it), while saying that he would nonetheless defer to his subordinate on the question.¹ Meanwhile, Trump appointed Gina Haspel—one-time director of a CIA black site prison in Thailand during the George W. Bush administration, where she oversaw torture of prisoners—to serve as the Deputy Director of the CIA.² This turn is strongly discomfiting, given Haspel's history. As John Kiriakou has recently noted,

It is a travesty that somebody like Haspel would be rewarded with the second-most-important position at the CIA. But what is worse is the message that Trump is sending to the CIA workforce: Engage in war crimes, in crimes against humanity, and you'll still get ahead. Don't worry about the law. Don't worry about ethics. Don't worry about morality. We'll take care of you. You can still make it to the top.

Haspel's appointment is also an insult to the likes of Defense Secretary James Mattis, the retired four-star general who told Trump to his face that torture doesn't work, and to [former Congressman Mike] Pompeo himself (now, CIA Director), who said in his confirmation hearings that he was opposed to the torture program and would not reinstate it, even if ordered to do so by the president.³

This list serves to point up three broader trends already apparent in the new Trump administration. First, the President and his immediate staff and many of his appointees appear to be embarked on an effort to destroy the credibility and legitimacy of any citizens, officials or institutions that argue for any perspective other than that pressed by the White House. As one-time conservative radio talk show host Charles Sykes has observed,

Discrediting independent sources of information also has two major advantages for Mr. Trump: It helps insulate him from criticism and it allows him to create his own narratives, metrics and 'alternative facts.'

All administrations lie, but what we are seeing here is an attack on credibility itself.

The Russian dissident and chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov drew upon long familiarity with that process when he tweeted: 'The point of modern propaganda isn't only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth.'

Mr. Kasparov grasps that the real threat is not merely that a large number of Americans have become accustomed to rejecting factual information, or even that they have become habituated to believing hoaxes. The real danger is that, inundated with 'alternative facts,' many voters will simply shrug, asking, 'What is truth?' – and not wait for an answer.

In that world, the leader becomes the only reliable source of truth; a familiar phenomenon in an authoritarian state, but a radical departure from the norms of a democratic society. The battle over truth is now central to our politics.⁴

Given this unremitting reality of the early days of Trump's presidency, the press, the courts and all Americans who wish to preserve their human and civil rights and desire that their nation continue to be known for such aspirations at home and around the world, must stand up to the President's nearly constant bullying and lies concerning immigrants and other groups and positions he has singled out for opprobrium. Those protesting the White House directives at the local level, including new and established grass roots organizations, and also via calls and letters to legislators and mass gatherings, such as the Women's March, which included people from across the nation and the globe, should press their perspectives by all available means. They should do so too as calmly and clearly as possible in direct contradistinction to the President's often ill-considered and overwrought rhetoric. Trump cannot be allowed to gain complete control of the public conversation. Instead, people of good will must challenge him at every turn, if the truth is to have a chance to emerge.

A second and related urgent imperative, already clear, is linked to the fact that Trump and his advisors are willing to lie continuously to serve the President's ego and to obscure the implications of the actions they have taken. Democracy ultimately cannot function when its officials routinely conceal or deny the truth and systematically mislead their constituents and take actions inimical to their interests, even while suggesting how much they care about those same groups. Trump has already initiated several actions that fit this description and together, his steps imply that he believes he may

proceed with impunity since his followers will accept all he says at face value, however obfuscating, heinous or uninformed those contentions may be.

That fact raises a third concern, and one must hope that the press's efforts to inform, in tandem with millions arguing against Trump's willingness to trample democratic rights and norms, will break through the rhetorical fog the Conservative entertainment complex has created among many of the President's supporters, who, indeed, appear willing to believe anything he says. Indeed, this challenge—the crying need for those now backing Trump's demagoguery to begin to count the costs of that support, rather than embracing a quest for power, or radical partisanship or his hucksterism—is the chief concern now facing the nation. Autocrats cannot gain their aims without followers, and Trump's apologists must begin to question him and to see his wholesale hypocrisy and pursuit of power for what they are, and soon, if worse is not to befall the Republic in coming months and years. The question now confronting the American citizenry is, as Sykes commented, whether it is already too late to hope that truth can prevail.

(Originally published February 13, 2017).

Notes

¹ Wong, Kristina. 2017. "Trump: Mattis's View on Torture will 'Override,'" *The Hill*, January 27. Available at: <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/316542-trump-mattis-will-override-on-torture>.

² Reuters. 2017. "Trump Names 'Black Site' Operator CIA Deputy Chief," *The New York Times*, February 2. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/02/02/us/politics/02reuters-usa-trump-cia.html?_r=1.

³ Kiriakou, John. 2017. "With Haspel, Trump's Infrastructure for Torture in Place," *Reader's Supported News*, February 5. Available at: <http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/41784-with-haspel-trumps-infrastructure-for-torture-is-in-place>.

⁴ Sykes, Charles. 2017. "Why Nobody Cares the President is Lying," *The New York Times*, February 4. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/opinion/sunday/why-nobody-cares-the-president-is-lying.html?emc=edit_th_20170205&nl=todaysheadlines&nlid=14836095&_r=0.

95 “Democratic Deconsolidation,” Freedom of the Press and the Primacy of Politics

Several astute observers had predicted that President Donald Trump would not long be content to work to undermine the freedom of the press generally as his so-called “enemy of the people,” in an effort to delegitimize any truthful reporting concerning his administration. Instead, he would at some point go further, and begin formally and officially to sanction specific media outlets whose work consistently favored him and his policies and refuse to accord standing to those newspapers and television networks he perceived as unfriendly. These analysts argued that virtually all previous modern demagogues who had exhibited the same thin-skinned narcissism evident in Trump had eventually turned from attacks on freedom of the press en masse to singling out institutions and denying them access on the grounds that their reporting did not suit the leader. And so, matters have now gone.

On February 24, 2017, White House press secretary Sean Spicer held an informal briefing with representatives of the media that specifically barred some of the nation’s leading journalistic organizations from participation, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Politico*, *CNN* and others. The President had personally and, in several cases, repeatedly, attacked each of these institutions during the campaign and now embraced the extraordinary step of denying them access to a White House press event. It is unclear as I write whether this action will become permanent, but in many respects, that hardly matters as Trump has already done enormous damage to a central plank of America’s Constitution and its citizenry’s freedoms with his constant false claims that critical or unflattering reporting of his actions are untrue and those offering such accounts are “liars” and worse.

The question, as ever with Trump, is what is next, and it appears that he will not personally rest until he creates a sycophantic media establishment whose members daily unctuously extoll him and his policies as “superb,” however anti-democratic, cruel or unreflective those may be. The President’s effort to muzzle the press selectively occurred just hours after he appeared at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference in the

Washington, D.C., suburb of Oxon Hill, Maryland, at which he had devoted a share of his remarks to criticizing the media, “A few days ago, I called the fake news media the enemy of the people, and they are. They are the enemy of the people.”¹

This statement is, *prima facie*, both flatly not true and deeply dangerous, and that threat was symbolically manifest in the effort to control access to information at the White House. The news organizations targeted reacted with appropriate expressions of concern. As *New York Times* Executive Editor Dean Baquet observed,

Nothing like this has ever happened at the White House in our long history of covering multiple administrations of different parties. We strongly protest the exclusion of *The New York Times* and the other news organizations. Free media access to a transparent government is obviously of crucial national interest.²

This step by the Trump administration to bar White House press access for organizations it dislikes represents another action apparently aimed at encouraging his supporters to countenance the curtailing of free speech as a means of furthering the rule of their “leader.” This is a very slippery slope indeed for a nation nominally devoted to civil liberties and democratic self-governance, for which freedom of the press is absolutely essential.

Trump’s efforts to delegitimize selected media organizations so as to avoid careful reporting of his administration’s actions may be viewed as a continued exploitation of the broader trends that gained him his narrow Electoral College victory. Political scientists Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk have recently neatly labeled the factors that Trump and right-wing populists in other western nations have employed for the purpose of accruing personal power as, “democratic deconsolidation.” They have argued that Trump’s attacks on democratic norms, civil liberties and the freedom of the press have garnered support among many voters as a result of:

Economic anxiety. Ethnic and racial anxiety. Growing economic inequality between urban centers and rural hinterlands.³

One might add additional factors to this list as it relates to the United States, including the canalization of modern media, the radicalization of the Republican Party and the willingness of its leaders to exacerbate and exploit social divisions to gain and retain power. That Party has coupled these

efforts with fifty years of political attacks on democratic self-governance as an unnecessary and usurping aberration that can and should be replaced in so far as feasible by reliance on capitalism and the market for social choices.

Whatever factors one includes in this list, it seems clear that our polity is now at a crossroads, as Trump continues to work to undermine our most cherished norms, freedoms and institutions. He has been able to do so by exploiting the economic anxieties Foa and Mounk and others have catalogued, while garnering substantial popular support by scapegoating and “othering” specific groups and institutions, including journalists and journalism, and promising that belief in him will assuage those fears and yield personal economic benefits.

Put plainly, Trump is increasingly asking Americans to trade their freedom for chimeric promises of individual economic advancement and contentment built on false grandiose assurances and relentless anti-democratic scapegoating. Citizens must resist this Faustian bargain, which undermines civil rights and allows no “truth” except that offered by the leader while ultimately eroding democratic capacity for deliberation, and thereby self-governance. Never in recent memory has the choice for Americans emerged more starkly: Are they passively willing to cede their personal liberties to a demagogue offering lies and censure of targeted groups to allay their economic anxieties? Or, are they willing to roll up their collective sleeves and demand that those they elect behave democratically and transparently and cease attacks on government legitimacy and civil liberties and work instead to develop policies that will address the actual challenges and complexities their society now confronts? In many respects, this scenario is not new in historical terms, as other nations have confronted similar moments. The issue the United States’ present situation raises is, does a majority of its citizens believe any longer in a free and self-governing polity in which they serve as the sovereign? Or are they willing to cede their birthright and sovereignty to fears and false claims?

Trump must not be allowed to pick and choose whose points of view gain public salience or be permitted to lie to Americans with impunity concerning his actions. To allow such behaviors and worse, actively to countenance them, can only result in the continued enervation of freedom and, finally, in a people who have relinquished their rights for chains. The stakes are high indeed, as it seems clear Trump will degrade civil rights and liberties as far as citizens will allow him to do so. We are about to enter a period in which that answer will emerge.

(Originally published February 27, 2017)

Notes

¹ Borchers, Callum. 2017. "White House blocks CNN, New York Times from press briefing hours after Trump slams media," *The Washington Post*, February 24. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/24/white-house-blocks-cnn-new-york-times-from-press-briefing-hours-after-trump-slams-media/?utm_term=.53de25bc6d06.

² Borchers, "White House blocks CNN."

³ Foa, Roberto Stefan and Yascha Mounk. 2017. "The Signs of Deconsolidation," *Journal of Democracy*, 28(1), January, pp.5-15.

96 Of Ignorance, Expertise, Demagoguery and Democracy

I have found myself reflecting on the deeply troubling uptick in anti-Semitism incidents in this country and in several major European democracies in recent months. At one level, this phenomenon fits neatly with the state of social and economic anxiety of a share of American (and European) voters, for whom Jews may serve as one of many scapegoats for their perceived woes. But while a tiny minority of haters have long denied the Holocaust and sought to ascribe undeserved and ugly attributes and machinations to Jews, these have routinely been ignored and/or sharply criticized by leaders of both of our major parties and the lion's share of our population. But as with so much else long settled in American politics, this orientation changed in the recent campaign, at least for one party and its current leader.

It should surprise no one to learn that Donald Trump played on a share of Americans' age-old willingness to discriminate against members of the Jewish religion, despite all that population has endured at the hand of blind hatred and scapegoating in the past, including the Holocaust. He also aimed apparently to draw a new group to this form of invidiousness by dint of his speechmaking and political commercials. Indeed, he released an advertisement near the close of the campaign that employed long-used tropes about a global financial establishment controlled by "bloodsuckers who have bled this country dry" that featured prominent Jews, including George Soros (an international financier), Janet Yellen (the chairperson of America's Federal Reserve Bank) and Lloyd Blankfein (the chief executive officer of Goldman-Sachs). This ad ran just days after he had offered the same arguments in his campaign speeches and tweeted an anti-Semitic image of the Star of David atop a pile of cash.¹ He was reported at the time as being angry when his staff removed the latter mockery from public access. As is ever the case with him, Trump never disavowed his use of this discriminatory grotesqueness to mobilize and inflame potential voters.

So, it must be said, and Americans collectively must ever remind themselves, that the nation's sitting President gained office in part by scapegoating not only Muslims and immigrants, but also Jews as somehow responsible for the effects of globalization and population change for which

his own party was in good measure responsible, and whose negative effects his party had long deliberately elected not to address, except to blame those affected by them for not “working” hard enough to redress them. The irony is rich and deeply sad.

But as dismaying as the reality of Trump’s deliberate appeals to cruel smallness, “othering” and hate is, it must be coupled with another reality specific to Jews and the Holocaust: Millions of Americans and Europeans of goodwill have less and less knowledge and understanding of the horrors that Hitler’s Nazi regime inflicted on Jews during World War II. The managing director of the Anne Frank museum in Amsterdam, Garance Reus-Deelder, has commented that while thousands continue to visit the location where Anne Frank penned her famous diary while in hiding from Nazi repression during World War II, many have little idea of why Frank is iconic or what her story reveals about the larger genocide to which she and much of her family eventually fell victim:

We find that, with the war being farther removed from all of us, especially for young people and people from outside of Europe, our visitors don’t always have sufficient prior knowledge of the Second World War to really grasp the meaning of Anne Frank and the people in hiding here.²

Likewise, Sara J. Bloomfield, the director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. has recently commented that while more than 500,000 students visit that haunting space annually, “attracting and sustaining their attention is an increasing challenge.”³ Yale University historian Timothy Snyder, author of the recent book, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, has similarly observed that

... the level of historical knowledge among people about the Holocaust is not very high. Remembering becomes a kind of circle—where you’re remembering to remember, but you don’t remember what you’re supposed to be remembering.⁴

Snyder, Reus-Deelder and Bloomfield’s comments suggest that vast ignorance provides space for revisionists and Holocaust deniers, and for unscrupulous political leaders to play on voter fears and offer this population as a scapegoat. It also allows those individuals de facto to downplay the dangers for democracy of mobilization on the basis of false claims tied to

hate-baiting scapegoating. I say this because so many GOP leaders and voters have been willing to tolerate and even defend Trump's indefensible race baiting and bigotry (if they have not outright endorsed it as appropriate), which behavior has continued into his presidency. For most, this seems to be an argument of ends justifying means, since GOP control and power should permit, in this view, long desired policy enactments and actions whose perceived relative import apparently justifies tolerating evil.

The combination of citizen ignorance, unscrupulous and placating partisan leaders and voter anxieties, and very human willingness to scapegoat those different from themselves now afoot in the U.S. appears sufficiently worrisome on its own merits. But, a new book by Tom Nichols, *Americas Cult of Ignorance—And the Death of Expertise*, has raised another and equally profound set of concerns that bear on this vital matter. As he has argued,

The death of expertise is not just a rejection of existing knowledge. It is fundamentally a rejection of science and dispassionate rationality, which are the foundations of modern civilization. It is a sign, as the art critic Robert Hughes once described late 20th century America, of “a polity obsessed with therapies and filled with distrust of formal politics,” chronically ‘skeptical of authority’ and ‘prey to superstition.’ We have come full circle from a premodern age, in which folk wisdom filled unavoidable gaps in human knowledge, through a period of rapid development based heavily on specialization and expertise, and now to a postindustrial, information-oriented world where all citizens believe themselves to be experts on everything.⁵

The phenomenon to which Nichols points now finds hundreds of thousands of Americans unwilling to vaccinate their children on the basis of crackpot theories embraced too often by misled celebrities and ill-qualified academics alike, whose “expertise” they are willing to embrace over that of qualified scientific researchers. Many of these same voters are aware, too, that the person they elected President has persistently lied to them. They realize that he has proposed policies completely contrary to his promises and their expectations, and thereby abused their trust, but they continue to support him nonetheless. They do so often on the basis of completely unfounded contentions that others are “out to get him,” or that he will yet “stop those immigrants” from taking their jobs, itself a demonstrably false

contention with no relationship to reality, served up for only one reason: to mobilize hate for political purposes.

The amalgamation of vast voter ignorance, social and economic anxiety, human beings' willingness to hate others in their efforts to produce simple explanations of complex phenomena to make sense of their worlds, demagogic leaders and a population's increasing certainty that it can individually be the arbiter of all things, whether knowledgeable of those concerns or not, has created a crisis of identity and of governance in the United States. The President now daily lies with impunity, as do other political leaders, even as they scapegoat specific groups for the conditions that those they seek to mobilize now confront. So, it is, that we have seen the rapid rise of a visible and unapologetic Anti-Semitism once again in this nation with the complicity and support of the nation's chief executive. So, it is, too, that so many citizens reject reason and fact for lies and flimflam and do so willfully, convinced that those who are arguing otherwise are "elites" who they may rightly despise, and, in any case, who they believe are no better placed than they are to make such judgments.

The consequences of this juxtaposition of major trends has produced a squalid politics in which the only arbiter is whether one "wins" power and can reward political supporters, not necessarily voters, with material benefits. Truth and expertise are daily mocked in this cauldron of willful ignorance. The President is serving as a chief purveyor of lies as this scabrous and enervating understanding of fact and knowledge daily unwinds possibilities for civil and prudential dialogue. There can only be one response to this ongoing and terrible trial for self-governance: persistent vigilance, unremitting attempts to model and engage in civilized behavior and constant revelations of the falsity of the lies now being pressed without reserve or apology by the President and his entourage. Friends of self-governance must deepen their efforts to inform those most anxious of the facts of their situation, and of the means by which their concerns might collectively be addressed without sacrificing the civil and human rights of any group of Americans. Fair-minded citizens should be especially attentive in these efforts to ensuring the civil rights of this nation's Jews, Muslims and immigrants, who have repeatedly and cruelly been falsely maligned by a malignant and mean-spirited demagogue, with the complicity of his Party's leadership.

(Originally published April 10, 2017)

Notes

- ¹ Milbank, Dana. 2016. "Anti-Semitism is no longer an undertone of the Trump's campaign. It's the melody," *The Washington Post*, November 7. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/anti-semitism-is-no-longer-an-undertone-of-trumps-campaign-its-the-melody/2016/11/07/b1ad6e22-a50a-11e6-8042-f4d11c862d1_story.html?utm_term=.c0c99c223064.
- ² Siegel, Nina. 2017. "Anne Frank Who? Museums Combat Ignorance about the Holocaust," *The New York Times*, March 21. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/arts/design/anne-frank-house-anti-semitism.html?_r=0.
- ³ Siegel, "Anne Frank Who?"
- ⁴ Siegel, "Anne Frank Who?"
- ⁵ Nichols, Tom. 2017. "America's Cult of Ignorance—And the Death of Expertise," *The Daily Beast*, April 1. Available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/04/01/america-s-cult-of-ignorance.html>.

97 Pondering a Once Shared Covenant, Preaching Limitless Individualism

I was fascinated recently by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks' essay arguing that our nation is now witnessing the evanescence among millions of its citizens of the idea of covenant. Brooks focused on the falloff, ironically among those in the working class most dramatically, of a belief in the covenantal character of marriage.¹ This contention is not new. Conservatives, and Brooks is surely a respected voice of the Right, have long argued that the decline of traditional marriage in favor of individualism has both reflected and quickened a larger decay in public morality and American politics. However, very few such commentators, including Brooks, have grasped the irony of their criticism. That is, few have noted that as they have lamented this shift in beliefs concerning marriage in recent decades, they have simultaneously attacked the legitimacy of self-governance while embracing an ethic of unfettered individual choice via the market as society's principal vehicle for social and political action and interaction. The two trends are surely intimately intertwined. Here is Brooks (quoting Polina Aronson) on the question of the covenantal character of marriage versus that of what he calls the "Regime of Choice:"

The Regime of Choice encourages a certain worldly pragmatism. It nurtures emotionally cool, semi-isolated individuals. ... 'The greatest problem with the Regime of Choice stems from its misconception of maturity as absolute self-sufficiency,' Aronson writes. 'Attachment is infantilized. The desire for recognition is rendered as 'neediness.' Intimacy must never challenge 'personal boundaries.' Indeed, a lot of our social fragmentation grows out of the detached, utilitarian individualism that this regime embodies.'²

Brooks and others may be correct that the decline of marriage as covenant constitutes an important social problem for American society and one, as I note above, that now is obvious among America's working and lower middle classes at worrisome rates. But I wish to concentrate here on a manifestation of the idea of covenant in our nation that Brooks did not treat, and that

seems also to be very much in retreat: its role as the foundation of what political scientist Vincent Ostrom has called the “shared community of understanding” that underpins our national experiment in self-governance.³ The origins of that sense of common purpose and obligation extend at least to the Mayflower Compact, which found the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock establishing their new society as they had previously always created their congregations, on the basis of a social covenant among their number:

Having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith and honor of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia, do by these Presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, for our better Ordering and Preservation and Furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by Virtue thereof do enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and officers, from time to time as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general Good of the Colony: unto which we promise all due Submission and Obedience.⁴

While much could be said about this agreement and of the covenantal character of America’s major founding documents, I highlight here the fact that the Pilgrims looked to God as the ultimate arbiter of their compact and they pledged a profound mutuality to secure their community’s sustenance in the name of that Divinity. The U.S. Constitution sought to place that oversight responsibility squarely with the people collectively as sovereign, rather than God, although the Founders also invoked the idea of a Supreme Being as nonetheless an ultimate arbiter of sorts. Our country’s Framers’ envisioned that the demos would exercise its sovereign role via its elected representatives, who would themselves embody and honor the covenant that placed them in their positions of trust. Nonetheless, the Founders did not assume that the compact would sustain itself, and they therefore looked to the virtue of elected and appointed leaders as well as to separate institutions sharing power, including federalism, to prevent its ready usurpation by those seeking power for its own sake and/or seeking to undermine the people’s rightful role in governance.

It was to this profound belief in the sovereign bonds of a covenanted citizenry that Abraham Lincoln pointed at the moment of a grievous breakdown in the American compact, in his speech honoring the nation's dead at Gettysburg,

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.⁵

Lincoln brilliantly and succinctly pointed to the covenantal character of the United States and to the popular sovereignty it embodies. He stressed the rightful role of America's citizenry in its governance and the bonds of mutuality that must sustain that body politic as it addresses that august responsibility. While Lincoln was well aware of such a possibility, he did not highlight the fact that democratic citizenries can come to exhibit so little understanding or willingness to serve as sovereigns that they can be manipulated by demagogues and charlatans. And yet, a curious combination of largely self-imposed factors may indeed have brought our country to just such a pass. Consider the following incidents that have occurred in American politics in recent days as examples of our current collective situation:

By all accounts, based only on a conspiratorial rant by a talk show radio host, later highlighted by Breitbart, President Trump accused his predecessor of tapping his phone line during the recent campaign. He did so offering no evidence and providing none thereafter, as matters evolved. His behavior was heedlessly and ignorantly fatuous and crude and bordered on slander.⁶

One-time GOP presidential candidate Ben Carson, now the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), labeled slaves brought to the United States in chains, as “involuntary immigrants,” who longed for a better life for their progeny, in a speech to his colleagues at HUD. The ignominy of that description speaks for itself.⁷

GOP congressional leaders virtually ignored President Trump's scurrilous attack on former President Barack Obama in favor of publicizing a proposal to replace the Affordable Care Act with another statute, which would provide large tax breaks to the wealthiest in America while denying or strongly limiting access to health care for millions of their Party's principal supporters.⁸

In each of these examples, the actors profiled, now in power in the United States, lied to their audiences, and thereby to the nation's citizens, in support of outlandish claims and accusations and the interests of favored constituencies. Trump and Carson's remarks were egregious on their face, while the Republican congressional leaders' actions were more adroitly circumspect, if no less cynical and potentially injurious to millions of citizens.

Nonetheless, if recent polls hold, roughly 70 to 80 percent of Republican-identifying voters ultimately will rationalize all three actions and support the lies they represent. They will do so in no small part because they no longer appear to trust popular sovereignty and have chosen instead, for an array of reasons, to embrace a demagogue willing to play to their fears and to scapegoat anyone he can to address his insecurities and to cement his personal power and standing. Meanwhile, that leader, President Trump, has placed individuals in power who are willing to deny reality and history and to impose heavy social, political and economic costs in the name of that denial, as they press their ideological claims in politics and policymaking. Meanwhile, too, Trump's fellow Party members in Congress, who should be working to hold him accountable for his lies and outrages, have either rationalized his malfeasance or sought to ignore it in the hope of later attaining their desired policies or of maintaining their current grip on power, or perhaps both.

None of this sounds like Lincoln's Republic and it surely is not. Substantial shares of the polity now appear willing to believe and support any outrage in the name of their alignment with a demagogue and his Party. At the same time, that Party's official denizens now seem willing to countenance any undermining of the collective good in the name of the preservation of their political power or reigning ideology. The upshot of this juxtaposition of circumstances is a situation of grave peril for the nation, in which many of the country's political leaders are now tearing at the sinews that bind citizens to one another in a common covenant of shared sovereignty in

support of a polity in which the favored receive much while the remainder are ignored, denied their civil rights or worse. The American birthright of freedom now lies in the balance. Those who countenance and rationalize hatred and the despoiling of self-governance to retain power will be judged harshly by history. No less an ideal than the American covenant itself—the idea of the United States as a nation ruled by its people as sovereign—is now in danger.

(Originally published March 12, 2017)

Notes

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² Brooks, “What Romantic Regime.”

³ Ostrom, Vincent. 1991. *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies: A Response to Tocqueville’s Challenge*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p. 19.

⁴ Text of the Mayflower Compact, 1620. *American Pilgrim Museum*. Website. Available at: http://www.pilgrimhallmuseum.org/mayflower_compact_text.htm.

⁵ Lincoln, Abraham. 1863. “The Gettysburg Address,” November 19, (Bliss Copy). Available at: <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>.

⁶ The New York Times, March 7, 2017, “Carson calls Slaves, ‘Immigrants,’” (video). Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004974502/carson-calls-slaves-immigrants.html>.

⁷ Baker, Peter, and Maggie Haberman. 2017. “A Conspiracy Theory’s Journey from Talk Radio to Trump’s Twitter,” *The New York Times*, March 5. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/05/us/politics/trump-twitter-talk-radio-conspiracy-theory.html>.

⁸ Wong, Scott. 2017. “Republicans Shrug Off Trump Wiretap Claims,” *The Hill*, March 6. Available at: <http://thehill.com/homenews/house/322567-republicans-shrug-off-trump-wiretap-claims>.

98 Heedless Policy Cruelty

In a recent commentary, Rebecca Powell-Doherty explored a marked social injustice perpetrated by major American health care institutions.¹ Powell-Doherty discovered an odd situation in the human rights and medical consent literature, in which major organizational actors, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), were willing to permit actions in developing nations otherwise considered unethical in the United States in drug testing protocols. Here is how she put the question she examined:

The currently agreed upon ethical standard, known as clinical equipoise, is that a placebo group is not appropriate if an approved treatment for the same disease or condition exists, and indeed, should a pharmaceutical company attempt to bypass this requirement in a study taking place in the United States, regulatory intervention would be swift and the penalty or cost imposed would be significant. Biomedical researchers are required to provide the existing standard as a baseline of care and determine whether the new treatment constitutes an improvement compared to the old, rather than with respect to nothing at all (a placebo). The ethical principles governing this specific issue are beneficence (efforts to ensure that benefits outweigh risks) and non-maleficence (do no harm).²

Nonetheless, she found that officials at the FDA, National Institutes of Health and Centers for Disease Control endorsed a series of pharmaceutical trials in developing nations sponsored by a drug company that deliberately eschewed the United States accepted ethical standard on the argument that the populations of those countries did not have access to the same level of care in the first instance. This stance violated long accepted moral injunctions and medical practice, and it did so ultimately by embracing a perspective that those from other nations may not be accorded the same value as human beings as those in the United States. In the calculated view of these institutions' officials, such populations were not worth the investment of the cost of otherwise attainable U.S. treatment. This situation constitutes a moral and ethical outrage and a clear abrogation of the human rights of those it targeted.

I have been reminded of Powell-Doherty's argument as I have reflected on President Donald Trump's recently proposed budget outline, and on the moral and ethical travesty of his and the GOP House leadership's determined efforts to obtain a vote this past week to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Each of these initiatives bespeaks an impoverished moral and ethical vision and a willingness to visit cruel harm on entire swathes of the population in the name of tax abatement for the wealthy. Each also ultimately reveals a cynical and ethically corrupt view that only rich citizens matter. These blueprints also represent a hubris that such costs can be exacted with impunity on those suffering them, since those groups can be manipulated by carefully wrought appeals to other fears and values to cheer for their imposed fate. Ironically, these officials seem confident that they can frame these ugly choices as necessary to prevent government-perpetrated injustice, or to punish "others" who allegedly have gained undue benefits at the public's expense. President Trump and House Speaker Paul Ryan have been personally willing to lie about the implications of their policy choices, apparently on the view that voters ultimately will believe them and/or will not hold them accountable for their sordid behavior.

The President's recent outline of budget proposals treating proposed discretionary federal expenditures called for draconian cuts in a wide range of such programs that play major roles in assisting the disadvantaged and vulnerable in the United States and beyond. Trump recommended the following:

- A 16 percent reduction in federal education programs, a major share of which assist those with disabilities of various sorts,
- A 29 percent reduction in Department of State and other development programs, especially those aimed at improving the lives and livelihoods of populations living in deep poverty in other nations,
- A 12 percent reduction in Department of Housing and Urban Development programs, many of which seek to assist those who are homeless or require support to afford decent housing or live in disadvantage neighborhoods or communities
- A 21 percent reduction in Department of Labor programs designed to ensure safe conditions and equitable treatment of the nation's workforce,
- A 16 percent reduction in Department of Health and Human Services programs, many of which are aimed at providing support for vulnerable

populations, including women, infants and children.³

These recommendations were significant for their radical character and for their extremely harmful impacts on the populations they serve, were they to be enacted. They were also noteworthy because the President had given few hints during his campaign that he would offer a set of changes in national priorities with clearly negative implications for the millions who had voted for him. The important points about this proposed blueprint are its outsized impacts for the nation's vulnerable populations, and the arrogance and utter disdain for those groups that it represents. In short, the Trump budget outline exhibits a willingness to distinguish between a "valuable us" and a "discardable them," similar to that which national health officials evidenced in Powell-Doherty's analysis. Like those representatives' actions, the President's budget priorities embrace steps that will redound to the deep detriment of those targeted as "less than" or unworthy of support and assistance or equal treatment.

President Trump and the Republican Party in the House of Representatives have recently provided another example of a profound willingness to wreak serious harm on their constituents while lying about doing so, and then celebrating their action as a signal positive achievement. In fact, what Trump and Ryan achieved with their narrow symbolic "victory" to repeal the Affordable Care Act represented the most obvious indication to date of their readiness to disregard the suffering their actions would cause for millions so that they could reward the nation's most wealthy with a huge tax reduction. To begin, the process the House employed to consider the repeal bill was extraordinary. No committee hearings of any kind were held to ponder its provisions or to hear the views of stakeholders. Indeed, Members did not even have complete copies of the bill when asked to vote on it. Moreover, to avoid accountability for the consequences of its elements, Ryan moved the repeal bill to the Floor for a vote before the Congressional Budget Office could release its independent analysis of the implications of its terms for Americans' access to health care. Finally, Ryan and Trump pressed for a vote aware that every major health care organization, including the American Medical Association, opposed the bill's passage.

As *The New York Times* has editorialized, this GOP proposal would impose distress on millions of Americans by eliminating a requirement that insurers ignore existing medical conditions; by deeply reducing support for Medicaid during the coming decade, which provides health care to approximately

74 million elderly, disabled and poor Americans; and by slashing aid for those who cannot obtain insurance via their employers, resulting in huge increases in their personal premiums and leaving many uninsured as a result. Meanwhile, this GOP “victory” would reduce Federal tax revenue by about \$880 billion during the next 10 years, and nearly all of those tax cuts would go to the nation’s wealthy.⁴

The examples briefly outlined here provide evidence that the United States now stands at a dangerous pass as its president and dominant political party daily foist profound costs on a major share of the body politic, while arguing, and lying as they do so, that they are attacking those who are “undeserving,” and that such harms either will not occur or are the responsibility of a vilified “other,” including government itself. Those lies and the political frame these leaders have embraced are deeply cynical and antidemocratic. They constitute a moral bankruptcy apparently born of power mongering, arrogance and ideology. By every measure, these actions suggest that these leaders view those citizens as “less than” those who possess wealth (and who financially support their campaigns). They also reveal a world view that only the rich matter in the American polity.

The paradox evident here is real. President Trump narrowly gained office by attacking what he called a corrupt political class that he said had for too long refused to acknowledge the economic suffering wrought by globalization for millions of Americans. But in lieu of bending genuine policy efforts to aid those who supported him, Trump and the GOP have thus far worked tirelessly instead to impose unnecessary and vicious costs on those voters to reward the wealthy, while cynically seeking to persuade their supporters that they are not doing so. The result is a politics of cruel venality heedless of the costs it levies in the name of providing political and material advantage to those already privileged. It is now obvious that neither Trump nor his congressional GOP allies are willing to accord equal standing to all Americans. Instead, as Powell-Doherty found was true of U.S. health officials in the case she investigated, this group of elected leaders is willing to inflict deep costs on vast groups of citizens to privilege a small cadre of others. More, Trump and his allies have worked hard to mask that fact and to blame others for its consequences, so as to ensure that many of those harmed do not realize the injury being visited on them. This anti-democratic and morally indefensible scenario is the antithesis of self-governance and must not be allowed to continue. Citizens of good will of all partisan beliefs must

demand more of their President and Congress and refuse to countenance the continued degradation of this nation's deepest ideals.

(Originally published May 8, 2017)

Notes

¹ Rebecca Powell-Doherty published her essay in RE: *Reflections and Explorations*, an online series of commentaries on politics, public policy and governance sponsored by the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance. The archive is available at: <https://blogs.lt.vt.edu/reflectionsandexplorations/>.

² Powell-Doherty, Rebecca. 2017. "Ethics Versus Efficiency in Global Health Care," RE: *Reflections and Explorations*, April 13. Available at: <https://blogs.lt.vt.edu/reflectionsandexplorations/>.

³ Parlapiano, Alicia and Gregory Aisch. 2017. "Who Wins and Loses Trump's Proposed Budget," *The New York Times*, March 16. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/15/us/politics/trump-budget-proposal.html>.

⁴ Editorial board. 2017. "The Trumpcare Disaster," *The New York Times*, May 4. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/opinion/obamacare-house-vote.html>.

99 Human Rationalization, Alterity and the Challenge of Moral Courage

Alex Tizon was a remarkable American journalist who died too young in March 2017 at 57. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1997 for investigative reporting and spent his career telling the stories of those most marginalized in American society. *The Atlantic Monthly* has just published his final story in its June 2017 issue, entitled: “My Family’s Slave.”¹ As might be surmised, it is an extraordinary tale. Tizon’s grandfather, a hardened Philippine soldier who died by his own hand in 1951, a year after Tizon’s mother married, “gifted” Eudocia Tomas Pulido, known to all simply as Lola, a deeply impoverished young woman, to his daughter in 1943. She was 18, and Tizon’s mother was 12. As sad and odd as it may sound to say so, this was not an altogether unheard of act in the Philippines when it occurred. As Tizon observed,

Slavery has a long history on the islands. Before the Spanish came, islanders enslaved other islanders, usually war captives, criminals, or debtors. Slaves came in different varieties, from warriors who could earn their freedom through valor to household servants who were regarded as property and could be bought and sold or traded. High-status slaves could own low-status slaves, and the low could own the lowliest. Some chose to enter servitude simply to survive: In exchange for their labor, they might be given food, shelter, and protection. ... Traditions persisted under different guises, even after the U.S. took control of the islands in 1898.²

Tizon’s mother and her husband brought Lola to the United States to serve as their domestic when they emigrated in 1964. Despite her title, however, both the journalist’s father and his mother treated Pulido contemptibly, even as she worked long hours seven-days a week in support of the large Tizon family, which included five children. While occasionally promised an “allowance” by Alex Tizon’s parents, Lola was never paid for her services, although she lived with, and served their family for some 56 years.

This story sharply reminds its readers of the cruelty and callousness of which humans are capable, and of their capacity to tolerate evil and wrongdoing in furtherance of their prejudices and beliefs, emotion-driven

convictions and/or perceived self-interest. It also reminds those who read it that slavery continues in our current era, even in supposedly highly “developed” nations. More, and of more analytic interest to me here, Tizon makes clear that his parents were aware that what they were doing was immoral and illegal, but they allowed the situation to continue notwithstanding. Above perhaps all else, the question that “My Family’s Slave” leaves its readers pondering is how Tizon’s mother and father (and later, step-father) could rationalize their decades of execrable treatment of Lola. Alex Tizon “freed” her and gave her a home for her last 12 years when that opportunity arose on his mother’s death in 1999.

As it happened, Tizon’s parents sought to “justify” their actions in a variety of ways, some conscious and some not. First, Lola was always “other” and “less than” in their eyes. Second, it had always been so, as they saw matters. Third, and importantly, to reveal and accept the truth of their actions, would have required a measure of moral courage that neither parent showed. Such a course demanded a rethinking of their most profound assumptions of who they were and who Lola was, and this they never managed to do. Fourth, fear played a profound role in their choice-making. Tizon shows that his parents dreaded the repercussions for their professional lives and legal standing as well as for their children should others come to know the true status of their “live-in relative.”

Tizon suggests that his mother, particularly, could not admit that she had countenanced such a travesty for nearly the totality of her life. He recounts an argument between he and his mother concerning Lola while he was home for a visit while attending college and long after he had realized what this woman was to his family. It arose out of the fact that Lola was having major dental issues and had never seen a dentist:

I said that Lola needed to see a dentist. She was in her 50s and had never been to one. I was attending college an hour away, and I brought it up again and again on my frequent trips home. ...

Mom and I argued into the night, each of us sobbing at different points. She said she was ... sick of her children always taking Lola’s side, and why didn’t we just take our goddamn Lola, she’d never wanted her in the first place. ...

I came back at her, saying she would know all about being a phony, her whole life was a masquerade, and if she stopped feeling sorry for

herself for one minute she'd see that Lola could barely eat because her goddamn teeth were rotting out of her goddamn head, and couldn't she think of her just this once as a real person instead of a slave kept alive to serve her?

'A slave,' Mom said, weighing the word. 'A slave?'³

Tizon's mother died unable or unwilling to ask forgiveness or admit to anyone what she had allowed to occur in her household. Tizon recounts that her last gesture before dying intimated some measure of repentance, but if such was so, it remained unspoken:

The day before Mom died, a Catholic priest came to the house to perform last rites. Lola sat next to my mother's bed, holding a cup with a straw, poised to raise it to Mom's mouth. She had become extra attentive to my mother, and extra kind. She could have taken advantage of Mom in her feebleness, even exacted revenge, but she did the opposite. The priest asked Mom whether there was anything she wanted to forgive or be forgiven for. She scanned the room with heavy-lidded eyes, said nothing. Then, without looking at Lola, she reached over and placed an open hand on her head. She didn't say a word.⁴

Whatever the meaning of his mother's final ambiguous gesture, it could not, and did not, itself atone for her responsibility for the calculated heartlessness with which Lola's daily life had unfolded. Genuinely to grapple with all that she had willingly visited on Lola demanded a searching of conscience and a measure of moral courage that Ms. Tizon never exhibited. In effect, Alex Tizon's story suggests that his mother had learned the lessons of heartlessness and alterity (othering) too well, and taken those too much to heart to imagine life otherwise. She could never accept responsibility for her own willingness to rob Lola of her humanity. As her son remarked to her in his anger, she could not see Lola as a person and was willfully blind to the fact that Lola was indeed a slave.

While this story of slavery in 20th-century America is obviously shocking, Tizon's mother's behavior and willingness to other and degrade another human being is all too familiar. Humans have demonstrated this propensity in history and in our modern era. The Nazi ideology systematically othered Jews and killed millions while declaring their lack of humanity. Too many

Germans agreed and supported the Holocaust. In recent memory, Hutus, Serbs and Pol Pot, as well as officials in Myanmar, have practiced their own genocide, while refusing to acknowledge the humanity and dignity of those they murderously and pitilessly persecuted. This list can too readily be extended. Indeed, our own nation's history is riddled with such behavior, including, for example, the country's terrible treatment of African-Americans, Irish immigrants, Chinese immigrants, Japanese Americans in World War II and, perhaps most obvious, Native Americans, among many other groups. This history suggests that while Lola's experience was doubtless extreme in our nation in modern times, the human (and American) behavior underpinning her subjugation is more than familiar. Whatever else might be argued, Tizon's story illustrated humans' capacity to other and to rationalize even the most tragically abhorrent of actions and behaviors.

Indeed, our nation's current politics includes a major strand of thinking and behavior that rests on a propensity to other entire groups and treat them as "less than." These thoughts and arguments are not genocidal, nor do they seek to justify enslavement, but they are no less troubling. Human capacity for "othering" exists as a continuum of possibilities and not as a single phenomenon, and individuals may lose their rights or dignity in societies as a result of such practices without recourse to the ultimate degradation represented by slavery or genocide.

President Donald Trump, for example, has disparaged and othered immigrants, individuals with disabilities, Muslims, Jews, government employees, former President Obama, Hillary Clinton, African Americans, Latinos and women in his ongoing efforts to mobilize voters around fear, hatred and ire. Millions of his supporters, and Republican partisans particularly, continue today to excuse these statements and actions. They also have rationalized Trump's increasingly apparent contempt for the rule of law as well as his childishness and intellectual laziness, as the product of efforts by others to tar him and prevent the realization of his agenda. The President himself has claimed that he is the target of an unprecedented effort by unspecified "others" to discredit him. Trump has embraced dark and far-fetched arguments that a "Deep State" is conspiring against him, or that virtually all mainstream media here and abroad are engaged in "Fake News" when reporting his statements and actions.⁵

The difficulty with these contentions is that they are preposterous on their face and shown to be false in any case, as Trump reveals his mendacity and incapacity for his office each day. The fact that so many GOP voters

are willing nonetheless to embrace these fabrications suggests a poisonous ideological or partisan zeal that finds them rationalizing that their president is surely better than any alternative that could be proposed by those who criticize Trump (read “other” Democrats), who would surely be worse than their known leader. In addition, some Republican officials and voters persist in believing that those “others” (i.e., Democrats, immigrants and career civil servants and so on) are not worthy of respect, and Trump will indeed realize his promised claims, if only “those others” can be prevented from stopping him from doing so. The frightening corollary, too much in evidence in today’s public conversation, to this mode of thinking is that “those people” must be shunted aside or walled off somehow, as they are the enemy and not fellow citizens.

This is ugly at its root and, unfortunately, all too human, and it poses a profound dilemma for self-governance in a heterogeneous society. Just now, as 75–80 percent of Republican partisans continue to support Trump while only 36 percent of the overall population does so, this inclination has become a central political question for GOP leaders.⁶ Thus far, few of those individuals have exhibited the moral courage to challenge Trump publicly, although many have made it clear privately that they regard him with contempt. Nonetheless, if still worse is not to befall the Republic at the hand of this President in coming days, those officials must step forward and put country ahead of party and push back when Trump behaves outrageously, sullies the rule of law or degrades individuals or entire populations falsely. That is, they must demonstrate the moral courage that Tizon’s mother never reached in her own peculiar relationship with Lola. They must practice that essential virtue, if freedom is to persist in the face of a populist demagogic assault on its foundations. If they do not, the consequences are predictable and, perversely, they will fall most heavily on many of Trump’s most earnest supporters. As author Aiden McQuade has noted:

It is a hard lesson of history, that when the moral courage of political leaders fails in the face of prejudice and vested interests, it is almost always the vulnerable who are the ones to pay in the bloody routine of violence that ensues.⁷

Only time will tell whether the nation’s current Republican congressional leaders will rise to the challenge that Trump’s manifest incapacity and othering-based demagoguery constitute. The civil and human rights of

millions of Americans, and perhaps self-governance itself, may hang on their choices in the coming weeks and months.

(Originally published May 21, 2017)

Notes

¹ Tizon, Alex. 2017. "My Family's Slave," *The Atlantic Monthly*, June. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/lolas-story/524490/>.

² Tizon, Alex, "My Family's Slave."

³ Tizon, Alex, "My Family's Slave."

⁴ Tizon, Alex, "My Family's Slave."

⁵ Associated Press. 2017. "To Trump Supporters, the Rea Story is about Leaks, Sabotage," *Voice of America*, May 19. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/donald-trump-supporters-see-leaks-sabotage/3862037.html>.

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⁷ McQuade, Aidan J. 2017. "Jefferson, Hamilton and Moral Courage in the Struggle Against Slavery." Available at: <https://aidanmcquade.com/2017/02/24/jefferson-hamilton-and-moral-courage-in-the-struggle-against-slavery/>.

100 Privatism and Relentless Attacks on Democratic Values and Human Rights

Readers of a certain age can recall a Republican Party that featured Senator Charles Percy of Illinois, Senator John Warner of Virginia and Congressman Everett Dirksen of Illinois, among many others, whose character and devotion to the United States have long and rightly been extolled. Those readers could be forgiven a measure of amazement at the state of the GOP and its leadership today. As I write, the vast majority of that Party's officials are supporting a President who lied more than 500 times on the public record alone during his first 100 days in office, who has routinely extolled dictators and autocrats of all stripes, including, among others, the Saudi monarchy, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines who has given his soldiers and police leave to rape and murder in the name of "law and order" and, most conspicuously, Vladimir Putin, Russia's leader, who has repeatedly demonstrated his contempt for democracy and democratic values. Remarkably, the President's lies, including his unsubstantiated allegation that former President Barack Obama had wiretapped his telephone and the initial claim that he had fired former FBI Director James Comey for his mishandling of the investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server, occasioned almost no official reaction among Republican Congressional leaders and Vice President Mike Pence. Indeed, many of these officials have echoed Trump's paranoid nonsensical claims that "the media" are spreading "fake news" because they are "out to get him," when journalists, in their quest for the truth, share the reality of Trump's actions, rather than his preferred spin concerning them.

Beyond his hateful and divisive rhetoric and personal incapacity to serve, this President has repeatedly betrayed the trust of a major share of those citizens who elected him, as he has daily shifted from what he told his supporters during the campaign were principled positions. Moreover, those changes have not been subtle or benign. Instead, and directly contrary to his campaign promises, Trump has offered a national budget proposing draconian cuts in health care and in social safety net programs that are vital to his supporters and their families (and millions of other Americans).

The President also worked hard with House Speaker Paul Ryan to gain passage of a bill in the House of Representatives that would sharply reduce health care availability for millions while costing some 23 million Americans, many of them Trump devotees, their access to health insurance during the coming decade. Again, the President has adopted these stands while telling those who voted for him he would not do what he in fact did. The list of his shifting positions is virtually endless and suggests a chief executive and a political party who view their supporters with contempt. Trump appears to believe that he can visit any harm on those who voted for him and nevertheless maintain their support by blaming others. One recalls his comment during his Presidential campaign that he could stand on Fifth Avenue in New York and shoot somebody and not lose any political support.¹ His stance in these terms is both unprecedented and unconscionable.

And, through all of Trump's daily and often-baffling absurdities and lies, today's GOP leaders have stood by and said little as he sullies the central values for which the United States has long stood. Surely among the most appalling examples of this tendency occurred during the President's recent visit to Saudi Arabia, where he railed against Iran, which, however flawed, was ironically, holding a national election at the time. He identified that nation as the architect of world terrorism as he accepted the plaudits of one of the most repressive regimes on earth, 15 of whose citizens were responsible for the World Trade Center attacks in 2001. While hardly a democracy, Iran is a complex nation of 80 million, which just reelected a relative moderate as its President. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, which received Trump's unequivocal support, continues to support a radical version of Islam and to prosecute a horrific proxy war over religious tenets in Yemen, about which the President said nothing. Trump's embrace of the Kingdom's autocrats spoke volumes. Similarly, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson chose the occasion of a news conference during the President's visit to Riyadh to suggest, while standing next to Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir, that Iran soon restore, "the rights of Iranians to freedom of speech, to freedom of organization, so that Iranians can live the life that they deserve."² He did not answer when asked at that same event to comment on Saudi Arabia's abysmal record on human rights.

Overall, while in Saudi Arabia, Trump and Tillerson demonstrated that money and trade were far more important than human or civil rights. As Trump argued in Riyadh,

We are not here to lecture. We are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be or how to worship. Instead, we are here to offer partnership – based on shared interests and values – to pursue a better future for us all.³

In fact, it was unclear what those “shared values” were except an unprecedented arms deal, since they obviously did not include a common devotion to freedom, democracy or human rights. As Peter Baker and Michael Shear, of *The New York Times*, have reported,

The latest human rights report produced by Mr. Tillerson’s own department mentions Saudi Arabia’s ‘restrictions on universal rights, such as freedom of expression, including on the internet, and the freedoms of assembly, association, movement and religion,’ as well as the country’s ‘pervasive gender discrimination.’

Raif Badawi, a writer, has been in prison since 2012 after starting a blog called Free Saudi Liberals Network. Freedom House, an advocacy group based in Washington, ranks Saudi Arabia among the 11 least free nations in the world, giving the country a score of 10 out of 100 on its freedom index, below Iran’s 17.⁴

In short, Trump and his Secretary of State have declared economic interests to be more important than human rights and democratic principle. While all Presidents must manage this tension, none in recent memory have eschewed human rights so completely as Trump in favor of a straightforward calculus of economic advantage, even when that meant ignoring completely outrageous human rights infractions, as he surely did during his visit to Riyadh. But he and members of his administration went further, and not only declared money more important than principles and values, they embraced completely a regime that has worked assiduously to spread an especially extreme version of Islam, Wahhabism, which has played an animating role in the current murderous Islamic State movement.

In his stance in Saudi Arabia, at least, Trump’s position is consonant with his larger embrace of authoritarian regimes and his own persistent degradation of American institutions and values here at home, by means of continuing attacks on the rule of law, freedom of the press and freedom of religion as well as tolerance, among others. Indeed, one can view Trump’s single-minded embrace of the material, irrespective of its provenance,

distribution and consequences, rather than freedom and human rights, as the central premise underpinning his administration (and the Republican Party, which he has come to dominate) today.

The Party appears increasingly united with Trump in its embrace of power and wealth for their own sake and irrespective of their implications for democratic principle or human or civil rights. This stance helps to explain, if hardly to justify, GOP Congressional and other Party leaders' acceptance of Trump's misogyny and alleged assaults on multiple women and his unfounded attacks on a wide variety of individuals and groups, including Hillary Clinton, former President Obama, immigrants, the courts and the press. The view among GOP officials seems to be that one can tolerate Trump as long as whatever he undertakes, however outlandish, "works" and allows them to grasp and maintain power and to attain and reward wealth.

Put plainly, Trump and his Congressional party members appear united in their embrace of wealth as the ultimate good. More, it is clear that, for these officials, if such requires sacrificing the interests of supporters, or lying in efforts to convince those voters to blame "others" for actions for which they are actually responsible, they are increasingly willing to rationalize such behavior as necessary to secure the perceived imperative of wealth and the support of society's richest citizens. In this view, widespread poverty, privation, hunger and systematic degradation of human and civil rights can all be rationalized as appropriate in the pursuit of material gain. All of this can be legitimized, too, by calling on Americans to embrace a public philosophy in which they owe nothing to one another and share nothing in common. Instead, following this line of thought, Americans should seek relentlessly to pursue their own self-interest in wealth and do so amorally, by whatever means, irrespective of the consequences for others. This perspective also urges citizens to loathe individuals and groups different from themselves and to view their lives as a zero-sum game, rather than imagine they are part of a larger community of shared democratic truths and material possibilities. In this view, if one is poor, it is because one wants to be poor, as poverty is a "state of mind," according to Ben Carson, Trump's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, in a recent interview.⁵

Seen in this light, President Trump's recent trip to the Middle East revealed the bankruptcy of his mercantilistic and mean-spirited vision of the nation, in which he respects no one, including his supporters, and nothing other than power, wealth and his own aggrandizement. It also underscored the necessity once more for all Americans interested in the preservation of

our country's democratic principles and values to press for an alternative vision. That imaginary would see this nation as a diverse people united in an uneven, but enduring and very human quest for just and equal treatment and the assurance of opportunity for all of its citizens, irrespective of their religion, gender, national origin or other characteristics.

Hate, fear and a continued single-minded focus on the individual and the material, to the exclusion of all other values and claims, can only degrade and undermine this country. These must be countered at every turn with reminders that Americans are one sovereign people with a common devotion to the pursuit of freedom and equality for all of our number, and not the amoral, self-absorbed, acquisitive denizens of fear, hatred and contemptuousness that Trump and his Congressional GOP allies and others now daily ask us to imagine ourselves to be.

(Originally published June 5, 2017)

Notes

¹ The Guardian. 2016. "Donald Trump: I could shoot Somebody and Not Lose Votes," *The Guardian*, January 24. Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2016/jan/24/donald-trump-i-could-shoot-somebody-and-not-lose-votes-video>.

² Baker, Peter and Michael Shear. 2017. "To Trump Human Rights Concerns are Often a Barrier to Trade," *The New York Times*, May 20. Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/20/world/middleeast/rex-w-tillerson-saudi-arabia-human-rights.html>.

³ Baker and Shear. "Trump Human Rights."

⁴ Baker and Shear. "Trump Human Rights."

⁵ DelReal, Jose. 2017. "Ben Carson calls Poverty 'A State of Mind' During Interview," *The Washington Post*, May 24. Available at:

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101 A Remediable Choice or Continued Democratic Decline?

The first *Soundings* column, published on January 17, 2010, was entitled “Democratic Expectations: A Nation of Toddlers?” It examined the idea that democracy entrusts all who meet the criteria for citizenship, whatever their native capacities or station in life, with the franchise and assumes that each individual can act with prudence and wisdom as they exercise it. For many past theorists of democracy and philosophers of governance, that assumption represented an Achilles heel that portended failure for this regime form. By any measure, these analysts argued, humankind has hardly shown a steady propensity to discipline itself against fear (and fear-mongering), “othering,” avarice, jealousy or other vices when it must rely only on its own devices to do so. Why, then, choose a governance form that requires just such a characteristic? Nonetheless, our Founders selected a Republican variant of self-rule, which government has, in the ensuing period since our nation’s creation, become ever more democratic. They did so believing that a combination of legal and institutional checks, ethical leaders and civically virtuous citizens could overcome any inherent human tendency to trade sovereignty and civil and human rights for promises of material goods, or social superiority or well-being. I argued in that initial commentary that a share of Americans exhibited an increasing tendency to demand that their leaders, irrespective of their partisanship, deliver the impossible. As a result, many would-be officials simply would not tell those voters that it was not possible to deliver goods and services with perfect efficiency in so large and heterogeneous a nation and amidst such social complexity, or to “fix” sticky concerns such as drug addiction, homelessness or, indeed, poverty and hunger. Those leaders instead fell to promising the equivalent of patent medicine remedies, or they blamed the victims suffering from such conditions for their situations.

In short, it was clear in 2010, and is even more so today, that millions of Americans are willing to embrace politicians who proselytize for policies that evidence little or no relationship to their lived reality and that promise the impossible. Indeed, many citizens continue not only to accept such rhetoric, but also to demand just such from their would-be leaders. That is, these voters, on the basis of whatever combination of factors you may wish to

hypothesize, have gone so far as to embrace demagogues and charlatans for public office if those individuals promised quick fixes, blamed scapegoats as simple targets for what were, in fact, complex concerns, or offered easy mechanisms to address otherwise thorny social or economic problems.

So, it is, for example, that millions of Americans have shown themselves willing to believe that government, and not capitalist driven economic change, is ultimately to blame for the shifts they have experienced in their workplaces. In fact, public policies might have softened some of that capitalist blow, but the Republican Party has fought steadily and diligently to prevent that possibility, even as its representatives campaigned on platforms blaming self-governance broadly and specific groups more particularly, for whatever economic difficulties voters might be experiencing. Indeed, for forty years, and with increasing ferocity, the GOP has argued that governance is the source of nearly all social woes and that adopting a larger sphere for the market while also punishing (read scapegoating) one or more groups would be its antidote. The GOP-dominated House of Representatives recently voted, for example, to roll back protections designed to avoid the potential for another 2008 style financial crisis on the grounds that those efforts cost capitalists undue time and money. Unfortunately, as with virtually all such absolute ideological claims for the market, there is no substantiating evidence for this perspective. And, if the GOP-controlled Senate should follow suit, the country will be held hostage to the prospect of another market-driven economic meltdown or depression. The House vote was needless and heedless and it endangers the nation unnecessarily, but you may be sure that should another economic crisis occur, those same lawmakers would blame government or another supposed scapegoat for the possibility that their own action allowed market actors to unleash.

Nevertheless, millions of working and middle-class Americans appear to have believed GOP leaders who have told them for decades that tax cuts for the richest in society would assist them, when in fact those reductions have done little to support them or their families. More, Republican elected officials have persuaded those same individuals that the governmental fiscal deficits that resulted from such policy choices were not the product of those who pressed for them to support the nation's wealthy and its capitalists, but instead were the result of inefficiency of the federal workforce or of perfidy by their fellow citizens or of governance itself. In each of these cases, many voters believed in a chimera and were reinforced in doing so by artful leaders willing to encourage their false beliefs. Just as often,

and sadly, Republican leaders have accompanied these anti-governance and anti-democratic contentions with the unethical and immoral argument, sometimes more subtly pressed than others, that “others” (always including the “poor” and African Americans, and sometimes immigrants, Jews, Native Americans and Hispanics) were “taking” (implicitly white) voters’ hard-won efforts from them.

If we fast forward to the present, these social and political trends have only deepened. Donald Trump narrowly won the presidency in November by exploiting the fears and grievances of a share of (mostly) white Americans who saw themselves as buffeted by social and economic change. He asked that they put their trust in him as he worked to clean up the “swamp” in Washington D.C. that allegedly produced these concerns. He has persistently referred to a nonexistent “Deep State” as a way of denigrating government agencies and governance as an “Other” (rather than as the handmaiden of the sovereign) that supposedly “did this to” these citizens maliciously. He has likewise attacked freedom of speech, the press, the judiciary and labeled perceived political opponents of all stripes as “losers” or worse. Millions have indeed embraced Trump on these demagogic terms and have continued to support him as he has ruthlessly scapegoated Muslims, immigrants and refugees, African Americans and Hispanics, among other people, as the architects of the often-fantastical woes he has attributed to them.

Today, as Trump faces a crisis brought on by his apparent willingness to seek to skirt the rule of law and his similar aversion to prosecute those who may have assisted Russia in its efforts to meddle in our nation’s last election (among many other concerns), some 37 percent of American citizens, and a high percentage of those claiming Republican partisanship, who have responded to recent surveys remain willing to believe his claims that all who find fault with his so far incompetent and venal administration are in fact reporting “Fake News” or engaged in a conspiracy arising from their unhappiness that he won the election.

In short, they continue to countenance arguments untethered to reality that nonetheless routinely malign their fellow citizens and undermine our national institutions, including the Presidency itself, and our norms and ideals. One may debate the reasons why this is so, but it is surely the case that voters’ willingness to continue to support one who has already demonstrated his contempt for them repeatedly represents just the sort of outcome that those critics most suspicious of democracy have long argued is its most likely result: a tyranny (perhaps temporary) of an electoral majority

at the expense of the civil and human rights of one or more minorities. It may be that those supporting Trump have indeed decided to risk all in the hope that this individual who promises the impossible can be the first in history to deliver on that claim. If so, their single-minded quest for the material and for a recreation of the past, even in the face of the negative consequences it entails for the government of which they are sovereign and the society of which they are a part, reminds me of Nancy Isenberg's recent conclusion in her review in *The American Scholar* of a new and trenchant analysis by Keith Payne of why America has become so unequal and so class-based a society. Isenberg wrote:

The serious disability, which Payne underscores, of casting votes based on feelings over facts fits all too neatly, and that's scary. Wishing for a quick fix ('Make America Great Again') means that those in Donald Trump's column were so desperate that they refused to plan for the future and instead adopted the 'fast strategy,' by betting all their chips on one very risky choice. The sad conclusion that this book compels is that Americans are so out of touch with reality, and so hobbled by mental crutches, that social inequality will remain the dirty little secret that we cannot purge.¹

One may come to a similar dispiriting conclusion concerning democratic possibility as one observes our nation's current intemperate politics. Indeed, as outlined above, one might make that case by suggesting that our present situation finds a share of Americans risking all to continue to support Trump as both he and the GOP nonetheless ironically work assiduously to undermine their interests, and the president attacks the regime foundations that ensure their freedom. But I do not wish to adopt this conclusion, preferring instead to believe (and to hope) that Americans, whatever their partisanship and irrespective of their fears, legitimate or illegitimate, can realize the peril into which their nation has fallen and take steps that ultimately will right the ship. There are two key questions concerning that possibility, as I write. First, what it will take to bring a larger majority of Americans to a common realization of their situation, given the citizenry's high level of partisan and communal polarization. Second, who, among elected Republican leaders, will be courageous enough to begin to lead the conversation that will bring all citizens, including GOP and other partisans, to an understanding of the governance crisis now confronting the Republic.

(Originally published June 19, 2017)

Notes

- ¹ Isenberg, Nancy. 2017. "Waking from the Dream," Review of Payne, Keith, *The Broken Ladder: How Inequality Affects the Way We Think, Live and Die*, *The American Scholar*, Summer, pp.112-114.

SECTION IV
DEMOCRACY IN DANGER
(JULY 2017-AUGUST 2018)

102 The Struggle to Control America's Identity

A rightly criticized element of a share of media coverage of American politics is its tendency to focus on processual, superficial or dramatic elements or frames in lieu of serious and substantive information and analysis. A recent column in *The New York Times* provided an example of such commentary and I share an excerpt below. I do so not to echo that well-founded concern, but to point up that such writing reinforces a deeper pernicious trend evident in our nation's politics today. The paragraph below is what Maureen Dowd, a writer for *The New York Times*, concluded in her column on June 24, 2017, a few days after the Democratic Party's candidate did not win a special election for a Georgia House seat. That position had been occupied previously by Tom Price, now serving as Secretary of Health and Human Services. As you read her comments, keep in mind that a GOP incumbent had served that Atlanta metropolitan area district continuously for more than 40 years before the recent electoral contest:

The Republicans have a wildly unpopular, unstable and untruthful president, and a Congress that veers between doing nothing and spitting out vicious bills, while the Democratic base is on fire and appalled millennials are racing away from Trump. Yet Democrats are stuck in loser gear. Trump's fatal flaw is that he cannot drag himself away from the mirror. But Democrats cannot bear to look in the mirror and admit what is wrong.¹

I am struck by three things when I read this sort of argument from journalists and political commentators, whether it concerns the GOP or Democrats. First, these tautological analyses address process issues and strategy alone, and they typically suggest that if only candidate X or party Z had argued such and such, or had run a better campaign or had been "better" generally, the outcome could have been different. The answer these writers provide does not treat substance or context, but instead focuses on partisan and rhetorical positioning. These concerns are not necessarily trivial, but they rarely constitute all, or even the most important factors or questions in play in elections. For example, Price's district has long included a substantial

majority of traditional Republican voters and the Democrats had an uphill climb to win it after several decades of GOP dominance, whatever they may have argued and irrespective of who bore their flag. Moreover, it seems clear in the current period of high polarization that the largest share of Republican partisans vote for their Party's standard bearer regardless of issues, and only a party's strongest supporters are likely to turn out for such special contests in any case. Polling suggests this committed group of Republican devotees simply cannot bring itself to do much more than abhor the symbol(s) of those with whom they disagree (the other party candidates). This is also true of Democrats in slightly diminished measure in our current venomous political climate.

Second, Dowd's column, like many others, suggested that those organizing the campaign simply did not get "it," although what that "it" may be was only broadly or vaguely intimated. The Party and its candidate and mobilization tactics blew "it" nevertheless, since their preferred individual did not win. Again, reality is more difficult than such simplistic conclusions which, however elegant they appear to be, are almost always insufficient and/or wrong, or both. But this sort of claim undoubtedly makes those who offer it feel superior to those they criticize, and Dowd's sardonic tone in this piece surely places her in that number.

Finally, and most significantly, this form of argument both trivializes and instrumentalizes democratic politics to solely what can mobilize voters and ensure or display the power attained thereby. The dangers in this view of governance are unfortunately already well known in our society. Indeed, the Republican Party has largely turned to this conception of politics in recent decades and now routinely activates its base with appeals to the most basic and base of human instincts, rather than even pretending to appeal to the prudence that deliberative democratic choice-making demands. Consider, for example, that Donald Trump won office by:

- Blaming minority groups, immigrants and "foreigners" more generally (direct appeals to xenophobia) for the dislocating economic effects of globalization.
- Blaming government institutions in the abstract as the wellspring for citizen fears of demographic and economic change.
- Embracing his party's inherently elitist redistributive ideology by supporting its proposed revamp of the nation's health system in a way that would deprive 22-23 million citizens of access to health insurance,

a substantial share of them individuals who voted for him, so as to provide a tax cut to the nation's most wealthy. He did so after telling his supporters repeatedly he would not and claiming, without foundation, that the present system was failing catastrophically and could not be repaired.

Contemplate, too, that in 2016 Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell ignored Constitutional language and regime tradition by refusing to consider a qualified Supreme Court nominee, because the nominating president was not of his party. He did so on the basis of the fact that he possessed power in the Senate to do so, and to serve his Party's perceived partisan advantage and for no other reason.

In sum, we are now witnessing Republican Party elites, including the President and Congressional leaders, employ rhetoric designed to enflame and to appeal to animus and fear of others who are different than oneself or who might not agree with one's views. These officials do not tell citizens the truth when they adopt their positions, but instead, continue to denigrate "others" (the opposition, immigrants, minorities and so on) as responsible for what are, very often, the negative outcomes of their own policy choices. In this sense, a large number of GOP elected leaders are reveling in the process and strategic exercise of power to gain their personal or ideological ends, irrespective of the implications of their actions for their individual supporters, the broader population, the character of democratic politics or for the health of the nation's governing institutions. All of this is "justified" as appropriate and necessary to gain the perceived "wins" to obtain the campaign funds and retain the power necessary to serve a market enshrining ideology that so far, across four decades, has stalled national class mobility, created massive and growing income and social inequality, deepened social insecurity and contributed to the impoverishment of millions of Americans.

This is striking as an indicator of the moral and ethical bankruptcy that follows adoption of a view that any rhetoric that gains one's ends is acceptable. But its implications for millions of GOP enthusiasts who have been persuaded to support such positions by appeals to their fears and worse are deeply paradoxical. As sad as this may be for Republican partisans, the consequences of the GOP's political turn to demagoguery and faux populism for the polity at large are yet more unnerving and concerning. President Trump and the current congressional Republican majority appear intent on mobilizing voters on the basis of fear-mongering and intemperate

“othering” of their fellow citizens, and doing so to exercise power on behalf of corporate elites and the nation’s most wealthy. That is, these officials repeatedly have demonstrated their willingness to employ race baiting, fear, scapegoating, outright lies and much more to galvanize voters to gain and maintain power to reward corporate shareholders and the wealthiest, irrespective of the broader social and political results of doing so or, indeed, whether their actions harm those supporting them.

Americans of all partisan persuasions should be deeply concerned at this display, but many millions are either not aware of it or are willing instead to bask in the hatred and blame-casting persistently offered them. Likewise, millions are deeply aware and concerned, and they will need to remain engaged and active and must add to their number if they are to change our politics’ prevailing tendencies. The current reality cannot lead to any good, and looks set only to divide the nation further on the basis of race, national origin, educational level, ethnicity and religion—an outcome that is, or ought to be, anathema, to all citizens, whatever their professed partisanship. As I ponder this ongoing reality, I am reminded that analysts have lately begun to explore afresh the legacy of the gifted Jesuit scholar William F. Lynch (1909-1987), who wrote nine books during his lifetime. In his book, *Images of Hope*, published in 1965, Lynch captured the stark choices that he foresaw American politics could take at that time. Aided and abetted vigorously by an ever more radical GOP, our nation’s politics has clearly embarked on the second path Lynch sketched as a possibility. While his language is dated, Lynch’s insight into where ideological absolutism, fearmongering, scapegoating and devotion to power for its own sake could lead the United States was profound:

We can decide to build a human city, a city of man, in which all men have citizenship, Greek Jew and Gentile, the black and the white, the maimed, the halt and the blind, the mentally well and the mentally ill. ... Or we will decide to build various absolute and walled cities from which various pockets of our humanity will always be excluded. They will pose as ideal cities, and will exclude ... the Negro, the sick, the different.²

Plainly, the United States, in any traditionally accepted understanding of its Constitution, cannot stand if a majority of its elected leaders are guided by a vision that systematically excludes major swathes of the country’s

population on whatever basis, nor can democratic self-governance. These are perilous times.

(Originally published July 5, 2017)

Notes

¹ Dowd, Maureen. 2017. "Donald Skunks the Democrats," *The New York Times*, June 24. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/24/opinion/sunday/donald-trump-jon-ossoff-democrats.html>.

² Lynch, William F. 1965. *Images of Hope*. Baltimore: Helicon Press, p.26.

103 A Clear and Present Danger

Four recent events have painted a portrait of key dimensions of the character of President Donald Trump's persistent assault on America's regime and its potential consequences for self-governance. The first of these factors is his narcissism and incapacity to acquit himself with regard for others or with decency and decorum. That is, his personal character, or lack of it, including his penchant for pettiness and mendacity, is now undeniable, and his inclination to lie about matters large and small, consequential and not, constitutes a threat to the nation. Among many examples one might cite, this characteristic was revealed by two recent speeches, one to the quadrennial National Jamboree of the Boy Scouts of America last week and another to a Trump "election" rally held the next day in Youngstown, Ohio. A third indicator of this Presidency's portent for democracy is a new poll suggesting that fully 49 percent of those who supported Trump in last year's election believe he won the national popular vote. He did not. He lost that tally by more than 2.9 million votes, but he has repeatedly claimed otherwise, as has Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, the Chair of Trump's new Commission to investigate alleged voter fraud in this country, of which scholars have consistently found virtually none. This example illustrates both Trump's persistent willingness to lie to aggrandize himself (and to work to prevent those who do not support him from casting ballots), and to attack this nation's governance and social institutions—in this case, voter rights.

Finally, the President's false claim that he had consulted "his generals" before sharing his Tweeted decision to ban transgender individuals from U.S. military service, when it was shortly revealed he had done no such thing, demonstrates his proclivity to sacrifice the civil rights of selected Americans to the cynicism of his efforts to maintain the support of his most avid admirers, while lying about the provenance of his decisions. This choice continues a string of attacks on minorities in the United States first pressed during the 2016 campaign and continued since that have included Hispanics, African Americans, those with disabilities, Muslims, Jews and immigrants. His is an ugly demagoguery characterized by hate mongering designed to scapegoat specific groups.

All of these incidents also suggest the manipulation in which Trump is engaged. To date, he has continued to promise his supporters major change

to aid them, as at the Youngstown rally, while systematically taking policy and budgetary stands completely counter to those assurances. In short, these examples reveal how Trump assaults voter/citizen belief in American institutions and civic norms, even as he exploits the emotional consternation that his rhetoric and actions create in his followers, to pursue choices that will only deepen their economic and social insecurity. The paradox and irony are profound.

I treat each of these events briefly and then summarize their implications for self-governance should the President keep making false claims, the GOP continue to aid and abet his efforts and his devoted followers persist in believing his lies. First, however, I need to offer a disclaimer concerning a portion of what follows. I am an Eagle Scout and I worked for seven years during my summers as an adolescent and young man at a Boy Scout summer camp in Virginia. I ultimately served as director of the camp at which I worked and also was involved for three summers on the staff of National Scout Council sponsored efforts to train those leading Scout summer camps across the southeastern United States. In short, Scouting was an important part of my youth and young adulthood and it surely helped to shape me, although I have not always agreed with all of the policies of the movement, then or since. I suppose, as Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Connie Schultz has recently written of her husband, United States Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio, “once an Eagle Scout, always an Eagle Scout.” Brown is one of 10 currently serving Senators who are Eagle Scouts.¹

Scouting has a long tradition of sponsoring a national gathering or Jamboree in the United States every four years, and those events always attract thousands of youth involved in the movement. The National Council likewise has a tradition of inviting America’s president, irrespective of their partisanship, to address those gathered. Many Presidents have done so over the decades and President Trump accepted the Scouts’ invitation to address this year’s gathering in West Virginia on July 24. Unlike past chief executives, who spoke on the requisites of civic virtue or citizenship, or the importance of character to leadership or similar concerns, President Trump engaged in a 35-minute political rant in which he criticized former President Barack Obama, thanked the young people gathered for helping him win his electoral victory (impossible, as almost none were of voting age) and alluded to hi-jinx and worse among the very rich in New York, of which those assembled could know nothing.

His rambling rhetoric of often hateful excess and ugliness before a crowd of mostly 12-14 year-olds occasioned anger and consternation from leaders on the left and right in Washington and beyond, and finally resulted in an apology from Chief Scout Executive Michael Surbaugh, who stated, “I want to extend my sincere apologies to those in our Scouting family who were offended by the political rhetoric that was inserted into the Jamboree. That was never our intent.”² I am certain such was never Scouting’s intention, but Trump has not apologized and could not refrain from wildly inappropriate remarks at the event, nor from commenting that he was sure that the “Fake News” media would misreport the size of the crowd assembled to hear him (for the record, the speech was widely covered and the count of that group was accurately relayed). So much for encouraging the active citizenship of the Scouts gathered before him.

At a speech in Youngstown the day after his Boy Scout Jamboree debacle, Trump continued to make the same promises that he did on the campaign trail while paradoxically calling for unity, as he nevertheless acted in a diametrically opposed fashion by publicly disparaging the nation’s media and his Attorney General, hoping in the latter case apparently to encourage him to resign so a successor could be appointed who could end the investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election. Trump said virtually nothing during that speech about the Senate’s consideration of healthcare system changes then being debated and has indicated publicly he knows little about the topic in any case. That fact did not prevent him from labeling the current health law a “nightmare,” a claim for which there is no evidence. He concluded the Youngstown speech by comparing himself to Abraham Lincoln:

With the exception of the late, great Abraham Lincoln, ‘I can be more presidential than any president that’s ever held this office,’ he said. ‘It’s much easier, by the way, to act presidential than what we’re doing here tonight, believe me.’³

Trump offered this self-assessment as he continued to assail freedom of the press and work assiduously to undermine the nation’s civic norms. The paradox was vast and those attending still cheered, even as some wondered aloud when he would take the steps to ensure the better Medicare and Medicaid programs he had promised them. Meanwhile, Trump was supporting Senate and House healthcare bills portending massive cuts in

Medicaid funding particularly and the loss of health insurance for millions, including many of those at the rally.

A third example of Trump's ongoing attack on the American governing regime could be seen in a recent POLITICO/Morning Consult poll of a random sample of Trump voters in the 2016 election. That survey found that 49 percent of that number believed that Trump won the popular vote in November 2016. The question this fact raises is how they could be so uninformed. The explanation surely has to do with the fact that President Trump has argued in a Tweet and many times since that, "In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally."⁴ The statement is a manifest lie on both counts and has apparently persuaded many of his supporters that he prevailed by wide margins, when he did not. As I note above, he lost the popular vote by almost 3 million votes. Kobach, the head of Trump's Advisory Commission on Electoral Integrity, has likely contributed to this perception among Trump supporters by suggesting in a recent television interview, in the face of all evidence and analysis to the contrary, that "we may never know whether [Hillary] Clinton won the popular vote."⁵ This, too, is spurious nonsense and only misleads Trump's faithful to believe that millions voted illegally when they did not. If successful, this bald-faced and egocentric lie concerning the existence of widespread fraud in the nation's electoral institutions ultimately could deprive millions of their franchise.

A final example of Trump's negative behavior occurred on July 26, 2017, when the President announced on his personal Twitter account that he had decided to bar transgender individuals from serving in the nation's military:

After consultation with my Generals and military experts, please be advised that the United States Government will not accept or allow transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. Military. Our military must be focused on decisive and overwhelming victory and cannot be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail.⁶

In truth, the President had not consulted the nation's generals (they are not "his," in any case, but serve the nation), nor had they requested this shift. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs quickly made that fact plain following the President's Tweet. Moreover, current rules prevent military assumption of

the supposed costs to which the President pointed. Finally, several thousand such individuals are already serving honorably in the military and some have done so heroically. In light of these facts, it is not difficult to conclude that this was a cynical choice to discriminate against a small group of Americans and deprive them of their civil rights, to curry favor with a part of the President's perceived electoral base willing to applaud such action. It is ugly and unworthy, and by now typical and indicative of the lack of character of this chief executive.

These examples suggest a pattern of behavior in which Trump will continue to attack America's civic norms, its institutions and minorities within its population to please his most rabid partisans and to feed his narcissism. It is now more than six months into his presidency, and nearly two years since his entry into the Presidential contest and the campaign that persistently showcased the same disposition, and these behaviors have only become more frequent. It now seems clear Trump is unlikely to change what he does until his Party begins actively to repudiate him and/or his most vocal supporters recognize that he is not going to do what he tells them he will do. In the meantime, he will continue to tell Scouts and other audiences tales about New York cocktail parties and Fake News, and to rail daily against those who are investigating known Russian meddling in the 2016 Presidential election. He will also continue to scapegoat vulnerable populations, and in both of these ways he will work to undermine Americans' confidence in their institutions and their civic capacity to govern themselves.

(Originally published July 30, 2017)

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⁶ Phillip, Abby, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mike DeBonis. 2017. “Trump Announces that he will Ban Transgender People from Serving in the Military,” *The Washington Post*, July 26. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-announces-that-he-will-ban-transgender-people-from-serving-in-the-military/2017/07/26/6415371e-723a-11e7-803f-a6c989606ac7_story.html.

104 Voices from the Appalachian Coalfields

Appalachia, a vast region along the spine of that mountain chain, runs from New York to Alabama and contains rich deposits of coal. That combustible rock has long been exploited for profit by major corporations that have purchased the land or mining rights, or both, to do so. Indeed, to this day, a major share of coal-rich land in West Virginia, eastern Kentucky and far southwestern Virginia is owned by corporations headquartered elsewhere, whose executives do not live in the region in which their companies mine. Absentee ownership of large portions of its land areas is but one attribute of this region. Another is its relative remoteness, despite its proximity to major eastern U.S. population centers. This characteristic arises from its rugged topography and relatively poor infrastructure. Most coal mining towns in the region are not located near interstates and, generally speaking, one must want to visit them to find them. Likewise, most coal-dependent communities have witnessed decades of economic decline as mining has become more mechanized, its form has changed from underground to surface, requiring fewer employees, and demand for Appalachian coal from industry in Europe and Asia and American power plants has declined. Still another significant distinctive feature of these communities is their nearly complete dependence on coal for their economic vitality and the livelihoods of their residents. Finally, the people residing in these towns have long been characteristically hard-working and fiercely attached to the places in which many of their families have lived for generations.

I share these facts to paint a broad picture of the region, which is far more complex than this capsule portrait suggests. But I want most to establish that the coal industry and related employment have been waning across Appalachia for decades. Indeed, in March 2016 there were only 15,900 “extraction workers, machine operators and their helpers” in the entire United States, or .019 percent of the American workforce, and only a share of those were located in Appalachia.¹ Virginia’s coal-dependent counties, for example, had fewer than 3,000 individuals working in the more encompassing occupational category of mining in 2015 (and still fewer in 2016), even as Donald Trump argued during his presidential campaign and after he entered office that he would “bring the coal industry” back in those

areas in the Commonwealth and nearby states dependent on it by stopping what he called the Obama administration's "War on Coal" and by unfettering corporations from "undue" pollution and safety standards.²

What is clear, however, is that neither President Barack Obama, nor his administration's effort to combat climate change and the continued degradation of the region's (and nation's) rivers, water supply and air, "caused" coal's decline. To argue otherwise is to lie to a population experiencing a long-term disorienting economic sea change and to give them unrealistic hopes that a way of life and level of affluence can quickly return to their communities that most have not experienced in decades. Moreover, that lie contributes to the delegitimation of national governing institutions and, if acted on, as indeed the Trump administration is now doing, will not bring coal back, but will impose environmental costs on millions. Perversely, those damages will hit those working in and living near the mines still in operation hardest.

Nonetheless, many individuals in the coalfields of Virginia, West Virginia and Kentucky, longing for a more economically prosperous past that was last known decades ago in their communities, have supported Trump and continue to do so. What I wish to explore here is the fact that residents of these towns have nonetheless witnessed first-hand the reality of the decline of the industry that once sustained them, know well too that many coal firms have long exploited them and also realize that undue national regulation did not cause their present difficult situation. Even so, many from these communities support a charlatan who tells them that he can bring back a way of life now all but gone. One suspects it is their attachment to their memories of their towns that makes them wish to believe him, despite their experience and irrespective of their deep awareness of the costs "their" industry has imposed on their families. This paradoxical phenomenon is not new, and those ensnared within it are not to blame for it.

Nor, I hasten to emphasize, did malevolent government regulation imposed by the nation's first African-American President do this to Appalachia. That is a Trumpian lie. Obama did not wish to harm the region's residents, and to argue such, as Trump does often, is to play on citizens' basest attitudes and fears. To illustrate these arguments, I rely on a powerful book based on the reflections of Appalachian coal miners, men and women alike, on their profession, their lives and the political economy of their communities.

Sociologist Mike Yarrow and his wife Ruth Yarrow undertook 225 interviews, principally in the late 1970s and mid-1980s in Fayette, Raleigh, Mercer and McDowell counties in West Virginia and in southwestern Virginia. In 2015, Ruth Yarrow published a share of the observations of those interviewed in a volume entitled, *Voices from the Appalachian Coalfields*.³ Together, the interviews provide poignant testimony to a fast vanishing way of life. I cite brief portions of this rich text below to illustrate four larger analytical points germane to the current presidential administration's claims and policies.

First, as I highlight above, presidential or Republican Party rhetoric notwithstanding, neither unions nor government regulation created the predicament in which these communities now find themselves and the trends fueling it have been afoot since at least the early 1970s. Second, while surely earning a decent wage, miners have ever been aware of the precariousness of their work and of their employment. Most of those whom the Yarrows interviewed had seen firms cut corners too many times and witnessed too many friends injured or worse, or debilitated by Black Lung disease that companies refused to acknowledge, to imagine that most of their employers worried much about their individual employment, health or safety.

Third, and ironically, given the GOP/Trump narrative, a substantial share of these miners recognized that America's political economy and the near complete economic dominance of coal firms in their communities implied that their only hope for effective regulation of their working conditions would come from the national government. Finally, the Yarrows' interviewees understood that a major change was already occurring in the country's public philosophy that would soon rob them of the role their union had played for several decades in pressing for decent salaries, working conditions and benefits. They were concerned that lone company purview over those critical concerns would redound to their individual and collective detriment. I treat each of these contentions in turn.

Writing in 1988, Mike Yarrow noted the following:

The people we talked with have seen a radical decline in employment in the last ten years due to mechanization, increased foreign competition and a slump in the coal market. The pattern now is islands of employment in a sea of unemployment where the

employed few are expected to work longer hours, to produce more, and to ignore safety violations.⁴

Reflecting on the change to which Yarrow pointed, a laid-off miner named Tim offered these thoughts:

Looking for work is a 40-hour job. Takes three months to learn how to do it. And it's expensive—resumés, gasoline, Driving to Charleston to take civil service tests. I know one miner who lost his phone. Now he's too poor to get a job. I lost any sense of direction. I got so I lost confidence in myself.⁵

Mining technology and global demand have shifted markedly since coal's heyday in Appalachia in the 1960s, and no amount of claiming otherwise will undo those long-term trends. Coal will not soon employ the thousands it once did or suddenly support communities once dependent upon it, but now long in decline. While that reality continues daily to unfold in economic terms, it is hardly easy for those experiencing it to accept it and not to resent and be bewildered by its force and consequences for themselves, their families, friends and acquaintances, and for their communities. Equivalent alternatives will not be easy to create.

The miners with whom the Yarrows spoke knew well that the companies employing them were interested foremost in production because mined coal meant profits, but most of them knew equally well that safety had to be paramount, even when it meant slowing production, but that such would never be popular with their employers. As a female miner, Elsa, observed:

The company gives us an hour safety talk, telling us to be careful, explaining different accidents, and saying, 'Don't let this happen to you.' Then, when they dismiss us, they say, 'Beat the Day shift!' The company will tell you that if the bosses catch a man doing an unsafe act, They'd come down hard on him. They don't. That's a big lie.⁶

The miners the Yarrows encountered understood the dynamics of the American political economy. They knew that their municipal government would not inspect their work conditions vigorously because most local revenues came from the coal companies, as did many other community services and much philanthropy too, and those firms were not shy in reminding elected leaders of that fact. The same was true of state elected

officials, who received generous campaign contributions from the coal industry and who likewise were often reminded how dependent their constituents were on those firms for employment. These realities alone gave companies a great deal of leeway on miners' work and safety conditions, and meant that only federal officials were likely actually carefully to inspect mines and to levy fines or demand changes in safety practices. Here is how miner Ken put this point:

I'll tell you if it wasn't for the federal inspectors, There wouldn't be nothing done. The state inspectors don't do nothing. ... Nothing would be done if it weren't for the federal inspectors.⁷

Finally, miner Al spoke to the fact that the long (116-day) strike during the winter of 1978 had taken its toll on the United Mine Workers union and that many non-union mines were now opening and able to attract employees. He argued that a pro-market and anti-union logic had been embraced by government (which it indeed had been in the form of neoliberalism and antipathy to unions which would shortly be embodied by President Ronald Reagan and the GOP especially),

The country's in a sad state of affairs when the government takes the side of big business, as opposed to the people it is sworn to represent. It's the situation where dollars are matched against the people.

The Bituminous Coal Operators Association would prefer not to bust the union. They'd rather have it weakened, a controlled situation, whatever bureaucrat is in power as union president.

That's the man they can call on to direct the workforce, whichever way they want it to go. Capitalism, you know, the whole system is built on war and exploitation of the working and poor class of people. You either have slaves—or a slave-like work force—in order for the wheels of capitalism to turn.⁸

I cannot explain Trump's appeal to so many coal country voters, but whatever the basis for that enthusiasm, it will not be rewarded with a renaissance of the coal industry as Trump has promised, nor with the sudden return of prosperity to the many towns dependent on coal mining in Appalachia hard-hit by decades of technological and economic change.

Indeed, the future of this region's coal dependent communities remains murky. What is far easier to conclude is that they are being done a terrible disservice by these appeals to their economic heritage and dealt false hope in the bargain. For a people so long beleaguered, false hope can be dangerous. Meanwhile, too, the Faustian exchange Trump now has on offer will only continue to degrade their beloved land and communities with increased pollution and less safe and healthful working conditions for the declining number still working in the mining industry. These proud and hard-working people surely deserve better, and the federal government could play a vital role in helping them achieve it. It plainly is not now intending to do so.

(Originally published August 14, 2017)

Notes

¹ Bump, Philip, 2016. "There are Fewer Coal Miners than you might Realize," *The Washington Post*, March 20. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/03/20/there-are-fewer-coal-miners-than-you-might-realize/?utm_term=.9c3d96613c77.

² Gibson, Allie Robinson, 2015. "Southwest Virginia Coal Production Continues Decline," *The Roanoke Times*, March 22. Available at: http://www.roanoke.com/business/news/southwest-virginia-coal-production-continues-decline/article_4d5bf842-43ec-55d2-9d6e-1bdb029f110.html; United States Energy Information Administration, "Average Number of Employees by State and Mine Type, 2015 and 2014," Annual Coal Report 2017. Available at: <https://www.eia.gov/coal/annual/pdf/table18.pdf>; Guillen, Alex, 2017. "Trump Signs Order to end 'Crushing Attack' of Obama Climate Legacy," *Politico*, March 28. Available at: <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/03/donald-trump-obama-climate-change-policies-236570>.

³ Yarrow, Mike and Ruth. 2015. *Voices from the Appalachian Coalfields*. Huron, Ohio: Bottom Dog Press.

⁴ Yarrow, *Voices from the Appalachian Coalfields*, p. 7.

⁵ Yarrow, *Voices from the Appalachian Coalfields*, pp. 29-30.

⁶ Yarrow, *Voices from the Appalachian Coalfields*, pp. 65, 66.

⁷ Yarrow, *Voices from the Appalachian Coalfields*, p.12.

⁸ Yarrow, *Voices from the Appalachian Coalfields*, pp. 76, 78.

105 When a President Embraces and Celebrates Hate

The recent tragedy in Charlottesville, Virginia, that resulted in the death of one woman and injury to 19 other people, arose from one man's decision to ram his speeding car into a crowd along a street in that city. The perpetrator of this evil purportedly was in Virginia from his home in Ohio as a member of one of several white supremacist/Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi groups that had planned two days of events and marches to protest the Charlottesville City Council's recent unanimous vote to remove a commemorative statute of Confederate General Robert E. Lee from a downtown city park. The 700 or so hate group members who convened on Friday night, August 11, undertook a torch-lit parade on the University of Virginia Lawn, replete with chants of anti-Semitic slogans, eerily reminiscent of Nazi events in Germany before and during World II. The next day, these extremists, armed with clubs, shields and automatic weapons, clashed with counter protestors in downtown Charlottesville. During that period, one of their own saw fit to murder Heather Heyer and injure nearly a score of other individuals.

All of this is heartbreaking for what it says about the share of Americans who have learned or elected to revel in hating groups they perceive as different from themselves, and who have absolutized their passions and smallness of mind and character. This nation has always had a minority of such individuals whose numbers have waxed and waned with changing economic, social and political conditions. What we have not always had, however, is a president who embraces these groups, adopts their talking points and de facto, by so doing, encourages them in their vile assault on our nation's pursuit of freedom and equality for all.

We have that now.

Before saying more about the deeply unsettling press event at which President Donald Trump supported hate, it is useful to recall that Trump has long endorsed monstrous anti-democratic and venal claims. Here is a sample of his willingness to celebrate hate:

- Trump first rose to national political prominence as the principal spokesperson and proselytizer for the lie that President Barack Obama was not a United States citizen (and therefore an illegitimate chief

executive). In the face of all evidence to the contrary, Trump continued to maintain this fiction until September 10, 2016, less than two months before the presidential election, when he publicly, if reluctantly, admitted it was not true. Nevertheless, in a national poll at the start of this year, some 42 percent of self-identified Republican voters said they believed that former President Obama was born in Kenya.¹ Trump's stance was always a lie, but it signaled those upset that an African American was serving as America's chief executive that Trump, too, saw the incumbent as illegitimate. Analysts have long labeled this sort of rhetoric "dog whistling" or "race baiting," as it communicates to those targeted that racist claims are somehow legitimate without overtly saying so, while suggesting that the individual maligned is "less than" or "other" and therefore an appropriate foil.

- Trump chose throughout his campaign to impugn minorities of virtually every sort with equal viciousness and mendacity. These included attacks on African-Americans as perpetrators of lawlessness, on immigrants as a class as rapists and criminals and amoral beings stealing "American" jobs, on individuals with disabilities as vaguely inhuman, on Jews as puppeteers of international financial connivance, on U.S. Muslim soldiers as members of a terrorist class, even when they had died for the United States, on women as appropriate targets for male groping and assault, since such constituted merely "locker room talk" and on decorated prisoner-of-war veterans as somehow unheroic because they had been captured, even when those individuals endured unspeakable acts of torture for their nation.
- Trump berated his Republican opponents with playground name calling, and adopted and shared wild falsehoods concerning supposed conspiracies and illegalities committed by his Democratic opponent in the 2016 Presidential race.

This list suggests not only Trump's preparedness to violate long-standing canons of democratic civil discourse, but his willingness to do so with utter disregard for the truth and with contempt for those with whom he was dealing, including the voters to whom he appealed. And, from all of the evidence now available at least, he apparently did so to feed his own ego; that is, he undertook these actions to feel superior to those he degraded, and to persuade his supporters simultaneously that such empty viciousness was appropriate and necessary, given the posited contemptibility of his

opponents. Nevertheless, his rhetoric was neither necessary nor appropriate, and it helped to intensify his devotees' worst individual and collective impulses to scapegoat and to project their fears onto others and hold those people responsible for concerns that either were imagined or for which those targeted had no responsibility. More, this vacuous "othering" of opponents and groups deeply violated our Constitution's principles of human dignity and political equality and justice, even as it daily degraded public trust and whipped those inclined into frenzied expressions of their hate of the individuals and groups Trump cast stereotypically as "them."

One must add another element to this portrait of self-conscious malignancy in the pursuit of power. Trump may have captured the GOP nomination and the presidency with lies and ugly characterizations of his opponents and various minority groups, but he did so following several decades of Republican Party efforts to use race to divide and mobilize voters. As with Trump's efforts, and dating at least to Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy," GOP appeals to law and order and claims concerning "social welfare queens" living in the nation's cities and taking advantage of hard-working white people's tax payments were explicitly designed to mobilize voters on the basis of race, and to demean an entire share of the country's residents in so doing. More deeply, they were aimed at falsely dichotomizing the nation's population and pitting the resulting groups in opposition to one another. What is more, the Republican Party has embraced the lie that voter fraud is rampant in the United States and has sought to make it more difficult for specific groups to vote, including, perhaps not surprisingly, African Americans, a strategy that Trump has also undertaken to "prove" his counterfactual assertion that he won the popular vote in the 2016 presidential election. The GOP has also sought to attack immigrants and immigration and, more generally, to limit the civil rights of members of groups that frighten or otherwise are "othered" by what party leaders see as members of the Republican voter "base," especially in the South.

All of this set the stage for Trump's impromptu news conference on August 15, in which he adopted white supremacist rhetoric and arguments to contend that those protesting the neo-Nazi and other hate groups gathered in Charlottesville were morally equivalent to members of those entities. And Trump went further to argue that those confronting members of the Klan and their ilk on the streets were equally responsible for the violence that occurred in the city. Both contentions are categorically false, and taken together, they suggest a President who has no conception of the founding

principles of the regime that he nominally serves. America was not created by and for white thugs or conspiracy mongers who believe those of the Jewish faith secretly run the world or that those with brown or black skin are inferior to Caucasians. These beliefs are odious on their face, and yet, Trump has now defended them and de facto encouraged those who believe them to engage in the reprehensible behavior and violence on display in Charlottesville once again.

It is now clear that a tiny minority of Americans elected a man completely unsuited to the office he holds. He cares nothing for this country's citizens or for his supporters more particularly. Instead, he lives to be idolized by those individuals chanting his lies. Trump is a malevolent demagogue who has repeatedly, and now heartlessly and openly, embraced hatred and those who daily spew bile and lies concerning the supposed superiority of the members of only one race. Trump has continually demonstrated that he should be removed from his post for which he has shown he is morally and intellectually unfit. This is not, nor should it be construed as a partisan issue, as members of his own party have condemned this most recent, and many of his past moral outrages. But GOP leaders and elected officials now must go further than rhetorical denunciations followed by a return to the status quo. President Trump has now made it eminently clear he will not honor his oath of office and is an enemy of human dignity and civil and human rights and justice for all. As such, he has shown himself to be no better than the vain, ignorant and pitiable petty tyrants playing Nazi on the University of Virginia Lawn. Republicans and Democrats alike must stop supplying rationalizations for Trump's narcissistic, depraved and hate-filled behavior. He is intellectually, morally and temperamentally unfit for his post, and Americans, irrespective of their partisanship or ideology, who care about their nation and its governing ideals, should take steps to marginalize and remove him from office.

(Originally published August 18, 2017)

Notes

¹ Zorn, Eric. 2017. "Polls Reveal Sobering Extent of Nation's Fact Crisis," *The Chicago Tribune*, January 5. Available at: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/zorn/ct-polling-ignorance-facts-trump-zorn-perspec-0106-md-20170105-column.html>.

106 Rationalizing Away the Imperative of Deliberative Self-Governance

Clive Crook of *Bloomberg News* recently wrote an opinion essay entitled “Why People Still Support Trump” in which he argued he was dispirited by President Donald Trump’s public embrace of racism and bigotry in his response to the tragedy in Charlottesville.¹ Crook also was troubled by Trump’s pardon of former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who, while in office, systematically denied hundreds of individuals their civil liberties on the basis of their national origin or skin color.² Crook nonetheless suggested that those who supported Trump in these instances were being unfairly maligned by Democrats, intellectuals and many in the mass media. He framed his contention by suggesting that Trump supporters are generally understood by these groups in either of two ways. He first states:

There are two main theories of Trump’s support. One is that a large minority of Americans—40 percent [N.B. actually approximately 34 percent] percent, give or take—are racist idiots. This theory is at least tacitly endorsed by the Democratic Party and the mainstream liberal media. The other is that a large majority of this large minority are good citizens with intelligible and legitimate opinions, who so resent being regarded as racist idiots that they’ll back Trump almost regardless. They may not admire the man, but he’s on their side, he vents their frustration, he afflicts the people who think so little of them—and that’s good enough.³

I confess I do not understand this argument. First, it is unclear to me that all who criticize Trump’s supporters suggest they are racists or idiots. In fact, many analysts critical of those citizens offer a much subtler portrait of their beliefs and views than Crook’s caricature suggests. Apart from this empirical reality, it is nevertheless difficult to understand why “good citizens” who do not “admire” Trump would back him out of angst that others may disagree with their views. But Crook goes still further in his criticism than this unintelligible position:

The second theory—the correct theory—is a terrible indictment of the Democratic Party and much of the media. Why aren't the intelligible and legitimate opinions of that large minority given a hearing? Why must their views be bundled reflexively into packages labelled 'bigotry' and 'stupidity'? Why can't this large minority of the American people be accorded something other than pity or scorn?⁴

A bit further in his argument he suggests: "In fact, this automatic attribution of stupidity and bad faith is just another kind of bigotry."⁵

I am even more confused by these contentions than those I quoted above. First, Crook would have it that a third of Americans are willing actively to support an individual whom they do not admire and whom he argues has adopted reprehensible positions, and then argue that their stance is a consequence of others not being willing to like and respect them enough, or of those others considering their behavior or beliefs in simplistic terms. That is, in Crook's view, Trump's supporters' individual and collective awareness of that tendency causes them to be willing to normalize and rationalize the President's attacks on the civil and human rights of immigrants, women, gay individuals and many other groups and on the press. It is that concern, too, presumably, that brings many of them not only to countenance, but also to celebrate, Trump's persistent lies on multiple topics, including press reporting of his activities, the views of his opponents, conditions in the nation and more. It strikes me that reality is much more complex than Crook avers.

Leaving this matter aside, Crook nonetheless goes still further to contend that since Democrats and the media are to blame for pushing these Americans to support Trump and to rationalize his anti-democratic and demagogic behaviors and positions, all will be made well if these individuals will just "respect" Trump's supporters more. Here is how he put the case:

Democracies that work make space for disagreement. You can disagree with somebody in the strongest terms, believing your opponents to be profoundly or even dangerously mistaken. But that doesn't oblige you to ignore them, scorn them, or pity them. Deeming somebody's opinions illegitimate should be a last resort, not a first resort. Refusing to engage, except to mock and condescend, is both anti-democratic and tactically counterproductive. Proof of that last point is the dispiriting tenacity of Trump's support.⁶

Now, we reach the essential point: a vigorous debate is underway in this nation concerning two points and deeper principles that Crook's "analysis" does not reach. First, is the question of whether it is reasonable to assume that Trump is venting his supporters' or anyone's frustration in anything like a reasoned and civil way. The issue is not, as Crook would have it, whether one admires fiscal conservatism or loathes it, wants the federal government to do more or less, or would like capitalist values to play a still larger role in our culture or a lesser one. It is whether Trump is embracing any of those positions or instead simply is mobilizing voters to vote for him and to venerate him on the basis of fear and loathing of "others," including the institutions that help to maintain their freedom. To debate this point is not to mischaracterize Trump's enthusiasts, but to ask what the implications of their backing for Trump's actions and behavior may be for the regime and for self-governance, a decidedly different concern. Second, it is unclear whether ANY democratic citizen should be making policy or political choices on the basis of Crook's equivalent of immature schoolyard praise: "I like him because he degrades that person I do not like." This is not so much an argument as a *carte blanche* rationalization for Americans to embrace Trump no matter what he does and, absent any reasoned limits or thoughtful debate concerning the same, one that opens the door in principle to the undoing of democracy itself, a scenario Crook would presumably abhor.

And that is precisely the larger concern at stake here. Democracies cannot be sustained by citizens who believe and act on the lies of leaders who tell them that certain of their number are "less than" because they are the wrong gender, creed, color or any other characteristic. And citizens should certainly not be applauded for doing so on the basis of a supposed resentment that others are not respecting them enough. Nor should such individuals be informed that an appropriate response to their perception when they confront such a situation is to provide full-throated support to appeals to bigotry and fear by a president they "may not admire." There are no limits to this sort of rationalization in principle, and it bars the possibility for a dialogue concerning the implications of such behavior for civil and human rights and for self-governance by labeling it a debate over partisan preference.

In my view, it is none of these things, but is instead an appropriate discourse concerning the necessity of prudence and deliberation for self-governance. Asserting that a share of the population cannot be called upon to consider thoughtfully the positions and claims of those they support

because they are upset that others do not respect them sufficiently strikes me as both a specious and dangerous contention. It is dangerous because Crook's reasoning allows him to rationalize virtually any behavior evidenced by the President's supporters or, in theory at least, by his opponents as well, to whom the same contentions could presumably apply. One can say that those "others" made them think or believe as they did and then defend any stance they might take on that basis. This is a recipe for tyranny and not vigorous self-governance, and it is profoundly anti-democratic, the very criticism Crook levels at individuals and entities who do not support the positions adopted by Trump's supporters as "intelligible and legitimate." Crook's comments not only do not support democratic governance, they go much further and open the door to an excused and unfettered nihilism.

A democratic people must hold one another and their leaders accountable for their actions against their shared aspirations for freedom and equality. Crook does not, and this sort of "analysis" should be held up accordingly as the sort of claims-making likely to undo our regime, rather than support it. Not all debate about governance is simply partisan, and there must be an ongoing exchange of perspectives among Americans about the implications of their nation's policy-making and discourse for the health of their democracy. This should not be a conversation about whether some citizens support demagoguery out of resentment for being stereotyped, but a deeper debate about why anyone of any partisan persuasion would imagine such a position could support their continued enjoyment of freedom.

(Originally published September 10, 2017)

Notes

¹ Crook, Clive. 2017. "Why People Still Support Trump: It's Not all about Bigotry and Ignorance," *Bloomberg News*, August 28. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-08-28/why-people-still-support-trump>.

² Crook, "Why People Still Support Trump."

³ Crook, "Why People Still Support Trump."

⁴ Crook, "Why People Still Support Trump."

⁵ Crook, "Why People Still Support Trump."

⁶ Crook, "Why People Still Support Trump."

107 A Toxic Brew of Media Polarization, Extremism and Untruthful Advocacy

As Republican lawmakers in Congress have recently once again sought to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA), *New Yorker* satirist Andy Borowitz has highlighted one of the two apparent rationales for their effort to deprive an estimated 32 million Americans of health insurance coverage by 2026 and to remove their protection against non-coverage as a result of pre-existing conditions:

Americans who feared that Barack Obama would come for their guns are happy that Donald Trump is coming for their health care, a new report finds. In interviews conducted across the country, people expressed satisfaction that, by taking away their ability to see a doctor rather than their ability to shoot people, the federal government ‘finally has its priorities straight.’ ‘I couldn’t get a night’s sleep, worrying about Obama taking away my guns,’ Carol Foyler, a gun owner from Kentucky, said. ‘Now that we have a President who’s just taking away my family’s health care, I can breathe easier.’¹

To appreciate the irony to which Borowitz is pointing, one must first understand that the Obama administration never undertook an effort to “come for Americans’ guns.”² Instead, in the aftermath of several mass shootings involving semi-automatic weapons, it sought to ban such guns for public sale and to develop more adequate registration and licensure requirements generally to ensure that those who had violent criminal records or past histories of mental illness could not readily purchase firearms. The National Rifle Association (NRA) and the Republican Party (GOP) teamed to argue that any such effort was undue and threatened hunters’ rights and would result in the action Borowitz here satirizes. It did not matter that the Obama administration never contemplated such a stance: many gun owners were nonetheless convinced that it must be true by the NRA and the GOP’s persistent advocacy of their demagogic narrative. Moreover, many, as Borowitz suggests, still believe that such was true. Meanwhile, irrespective of the NRA and Republican Party manufactured

outrage concerning “gun confiscation” stoked by false absolutist ideology and deceitful “Chicken Little” claims, it remains relatively easy for deranged individuals to obtain dangerous weapons in the United States. America’s dubious distinction as among the most violent nations in the world continues unabated and our number of mass shooting events stands alone, an ongoing tragedy that speaks for itself.

The deeper point here concerns the storyline that has sustained this situation, promulgated on the basis of falsehood and ideology, and often, other unstated motives. The NRA has consistently attacked any additional licensure requirement for assault-style weapons as a complete undermining of the Second Amendment, a dishonest and untenable position, and one that is *prima facie* unreasonable. Indeed, the Association’s arguments depend on the successful propagation of a deceptive account to prove sustainable. Still, it must be said that such a stance supports the nation’s firearms industry neatly, an industry which presently sells thousands of semi-automatic weapons annually at a handsome profit.

If this sort of policy and political advocacy has consistently been true of regulation of assault-type guns, which, notably, are not used in hunting, the supposed *raison d’être* of the NRA, it has also been true of the Republican narrative concerning health care insurance provision for millions of Americans. For some seven years, Republican Party leaders and candidates have called for the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, arguing, among many other things, that its requirement that individuals obtain health insurance unduly deprives Americans of their ability to choose otherwise.

Likewise, they have contended that the Act costs its subscribers much more than insurance did previously. The problem with these contentions is that, however appealing to individualist ideologues, they are untrue or utterly nonsensical. A freedom to be deprived of health care when you need it is no freedom at all, and GOP representatives have never been able to produce evidence that the Act is a costly malignancy in such terms. The ACA has instead, without arguing it is perfect, provided millions of people health insurance who would otherwise not have secured it.

Nevertheless, according to various analysts and journalists, none of this matters to Trump and GOP Hill leaders today as they pursue the Act’s repeal once more, for three basic reasons. First, Trump is hungry for something that he can call a “win,” to share with his ardent base of supporters, irrespective of the fact that such a false and demagogic “victory” would deprive millions of those cheering him of their health care coverage.³ He is likely aware of that

paradox, but apparently believes he can blame others for the result, should it come to pass. Meanwhile, GOP leaders are in a similar box of their own making. Having maintained for years that providing access to health care to millions of Americans is a travesty, and then failing, once in power, to repeal that imagined abomination, they now find themselves under sharp criticism by their devotees and donors who have demanded “evidence” that they can deliver on their promises.⁴ In short, GOP leaders today are arguing they must take this action to take it and for no other reasoned purpose.⁵

Meanwhile, too, a share of their criticism has never been about the supposed freedom of individual Americans to risk sickness or death due to a lack of health insurance, if they so choose. Instead, to the extent they have been unable to repeal the ACA to date, Republican leaders are violating a pledge to a wealthy constituency to eliminate the tax that many are paying to support the law. More, they are failing to adhere to their ideological faith that reductions in taxes (of any sort) for the most-wealthy will free those individuals to use those funds to provide jobs (a proposition, interestingly, for which there is little evidence during the last several decades the GOP has embraced it most ardently).

All of these policy advocacy machinations and narrative claims exist in a rapidly evolving media/information environment in which those wishing to believe the sort of counter factual narratives offered by the NRA or the GOP (or other political actors, to be sure) can do so free of criticism by cocooning in news and social media outlets that support their concocted outrage about concerns that never existed in fact. In a recent thoughtful overview of careful analyses of the role of media sources in the ongoing polarization of the country's citizenry, Isabel Sawhill and Eleanor Krause of the Urban Institute observed that the “Fox News Effect” charted by researchers, may have been even larger in the 2016 election than in the four previous national contests:

Martin and Yurujoglu's findings are striking simply because of the sheer magnitude of this ‘Fox News effect.’ Indeed, the network may have played an even larger role in the 2016 presidential election, but no one has yet investigated the causal relationship. According to researchers at Pew, Fox News was the main source of election news for 40 percent of Trump voters, while there was no equivalently dominant source of coverage among Clinton supporters—18 percent of Clinton voters pointed to CNN as their main source of coverage, followed by MSNBC (9 percent), Facebook (8 percent), and local

television networks (8 percent).⁶ If the growing influence documented by Martin and Yurujoglu continued through the most recent election cycle, the ‘Fox News effect’ might have moved an election-changing portion of the electorate in Trump’s favor.⁷

According to the Urban Institute’s well-respected scholars, the implications of this fact, in which Americans of varying partisan dispositions obtain their information from widely disparate sources, and in the case of “Fox News,” one that routinely adopts GOP talking points as a filter for its reporting and talk/opinion shows, are growing polarization and ironically, an increasing role for broadcast media in that process:

If some of these platforms meaningfully influence consumers’ political beliefs, our nation’s political divide will almost certainly grow worse. When individuals select media sources based on demographic and political factors and these sources then amplify or strengthen an individual’s political views, the echo chamber becomes a feedback loop for increasingly intractable political polarization.⁸

Finally, Sawhill and Krause conclude, “Should big money or rising concentration begin to play an even bigger role in cable programming, control of the media could become the determining factor in electoral success.”⁹

Taken together these analyses and the argument sketched here suggest several disturbing trends for U.S. policy politics:

- the Republican Party’s adoption of ever more extremist variants of anti-governance and individualistic ideology and, increasingly, for the sake of doing so
- the continued polarization, wrought by demographic canalization and narrow casting, of the media landscape
- the GOP’s willingness to craft and press policy narratives and electoral claims divorced from fact and reality, even when those rebound against the interests of the citizens drawn to support them on the basis of the values they are presented as embodying.

These developments appear to be creating a politics characterized by ever more brazen falsehoods predicated on the absolutization of ideological or advocacy claims to secure voter mobilization. These efforts feed

polarization, with GOP Party narrative and related broadcast and social media outlets each encouraging extremism. The result, de facto, constitutes a continuing attack on prudential democratic deliberation of different points-of-view in favor of a willingness to valorize completely and, more and more often, false, policy narratives and claims. In turn, this cycle continuously raises levels of partisan division. These have only been made more intemperate by the coarse attacks on democratic norms and specific groups in which President Trump has engaged almost daily while in office and, prior to his election, during his campaign.

One may hope that the same voices that have thus far prevented GOP efforts to remove access to health care for an estimated 32 million Americans by 2026 and to blame those so affected for their inability to address their health care needs alone, will be able to stop like efforts in other policy domains, constructed on similar dangerous foundations. One may also hope that those citizens drawn to this parlous and perilous rhetoric will begin to reevaluate their stance and begin to call for a more grounded, reasoned and truthful policy dialogue. Whatever else may be said, present trends cannot be allowed to deepen if the nation is to emerge from this poisonous period of mutually reinforcing extremist, often simply untruthful advocacy with any remaining capacity to engage in something resembling prudential democratic politics.

(Originally published September 24, 2017)

Notes

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² Luckerson, Victor. 2016. "Read Barack Obama's Speech on New Gun Control Measures," *Time*, January 5. Available at: <http://time.com/4168056/obama-gun-control-speech-transcript/>.

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⁷ Sawhill, Isabel and Eleanor Krause. 2017. “Gauging the role of Fox News in our electoral divide,” *Brookings Institution Briefs*, September 20. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/gauging-the-role-of-fox-news-in-our-electoral-divide/>.

⁸ Sawhill and Krause, “Gauging the role of Fox News.”

⁹ Sawhill and Krause, “Gauging the role of Fox News.”

108 Chilling Lessons from the Vietnam War Resonate Today

Ken Burns and Lynn Novick spent more than a decade researching and creating their recently premiered 10-part 18-hour documentary chronicling the history of United States involvement (and, less exhaustively, earlier French engagement as well) in Vietnam. *The Vietnam War* has been warmly received and has even been dubbed a “masterpiece” by conservative *Washington Post* columnist George Will.¹ While I have not yet seen all of the film, I have seen several episodes, including part 7 (covering June 1968–May 1969), in which the filmmakers report a deeply disturbing series of events concerning then-presidential candidate Richard Nixon. During that segment, the documentary’s narrator reports that at Nixon’s personal direction, a representative of his campaign contacted the South Vietnamese government and urged President Nguyen Van Thieu not to participate in peace talks in Paris, to which he had previously agreed, and which were set to begin in the week before the November 1968 American presidential election. The campaign representative purportedly promised that Nixon would give the South Vietnamese a “better deal” if they complied with the request and he won the election. This allegedly occurred in the closing days of a very close contest in which Nixon’s opponent, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, appeared daily to be gaining ground. Whether as a result of that request or for other unknown reasons, Thieu withdrew suddenly and unexpectedly from the talks.

The film provides a short excerpt of an audio-taped conversation between President Lyndon Johnson—who had learned of the Nixon campaign’s purported role in this turn via the Central Intelligence Agency—and Senate Minority Leader Senator Everett Dirksen (R-Ill.) on November 2, 1968. During that recorded conversation, Johnson suggested that “this is treason,” and Dirksen agreed. Thereafter, Nixon called Johnson and indicated, again on tape, he had heard such was being alleged and that he had not so acted and would never do so. Johnson did not say he had reason to believe otherwise during their conversation, having decided not to reveal how he learned of the apparent treasonous duplicity. Here is the relevant narration from the film:

NARRATOR (Peter Coyote):

Nixon was lying and Johnson knew it. But to go public with the information, the President would have to reveal the methods by which he had learned of the Republican candidate's duplicity. He was unwilling to do so.

Nixon's secret was safe. The American public was never told that the regime, for which 35,000 Americans had died, had been willing to boycott peace talks to help elect Richard Nixon. Or that he had been willing to delay an end to the bloodshed in order to get elected.²

The Richard Nixon Foundation has argued the documentary's claims are inaccurate, but Burns and Novick stand by their finding, and clearly Johnson and Dirksen were persuaded it had occurred, as the film recounts.³ If true, it suggests an individual so desirous of power as to sacrifice American military personnel's lives amorally and cynically to obtain it. If matters occurred as outlined, this alarming episode shows a would-be President willing to commit treason and thereafter to lie flatly and outright to the President of the United States about his action.

But there is still more in the film concerning Nixon's lack of a moral compass and his near absolute mendacity. In episode 9, the documentary recounts the horrific and costly failure of the March 1970 American air-power-supported South Vietnamese army incursion into Laos, an effort to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail by which North Vietnam and the Viet Cong were moving soldiers and material to the South for attacks. In the documentary's account, the narrator states, "Although individual RVN (Republic of Vietnam) units fought bravely, the invasion was a failure."⁴ Casualties were very heavy, as were the numbers of South Vietnamese soldiers captured. Nevertheless, on April 7, 1971, following an additional American-backed RVN intervention into Cambodia as part of his administration's continuing policy of giving the South Vietnamese more responsibility for the war, Nixon appeared before the American people in a nationally televised address "to report that Vietnamization has succeeded." One of the pieces of evidence he employed to buttress that claim was the "success" of the Laos effort.

Following footage of the speech, the documentary provides an audio recording of Nixon speaking with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in which he tells the Secretary that his overriding concern as he considered the conflict was his reelection in 1972, and the war was a stone around his

neck in ensuring that possibility. As he and Kissinger discussed the speech, Nixon remarked, “I will tell you one thing, this little speech was a work of art ... it was no act, because no actor could do it. No actor in Hollywood could have done that that well, don’t you think?”⁵ Whether it had been delivered by Nixon’s hypothetical actor or, as in this case, offered by America’s President, the speech completely and deliberately sought to mislead the U.S. public concerning events in Vietnam.

I was a youth as this history unfolded and was unaware of, or do not recall, these specific examples of Nixon’s duplicity and willingness to mislead the American people (and likely, worse) to secure election and reelection. When I learned of them while watching the film, I was shaken. Nixon resigned from office in disgrace on August 9, 1974, in the face of certain impeachment arising from his direction and attempted cover-up of the Watergate conspiracy. What most Americans—and one supposes, the 24 percent of the citizenry who, according to a national poll, continued to support him just prior to his resignation—did not realize was that Watergate was not an isolated episode. It was only one example of a pattern of behavior revealing Nixon’s willingness to lie and conspire and even allegedly treasonously to sacrifice soldiers’ lives to gain and retain power.⁶

I share these historical incidents for two reasons. First, most leadership theorists today define that phenomenon in a fashion that demands that it be ethical to be regarded as leadership at all. By these lights, for example, Adolf Hitler was not a leader, although he exercised power. Nixon knowingly and repeatedly failed this test, and revealed himself in so doing as morally bankrupt at his core, irrespective of his specific policy initiatives or programs. He was, as the film and Watergate alike illustrate, an utterly unethical actor, and therefore in no sense, despite his election, a democratic leader.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the nation was fortunate that the break-in at the Watergate was bungled and led to broad awareness of the moral bankruptcy of the individual who ordered it. The country was lucky, too, that its governance institutions worked to force his ouster. Nixon’s presidency stands as a modern warning to the American citizenry of what can go wrong when an individual without scruples, and without moral or ethical moorings, gains office and is interested only in power and self-aggrandizement.

If this is so, it illustrates my second rationale for sharing these historical examples of venality and moral corruption by an incumbent president. Chillingly, President Donald Trump’s campaign is under investigation as I

write for conspiring with the Russian government to undermine the candidacy of Trump's general election opponent. The parallel to Nixon's alleged actions and treason, if shown to be true, is both appalling and instructive. More, Trump has almost daily and shamelessly lied to the American people about matters large and small. That is, unlike Nixon, he has not sought to obscure his venality and shame, but has instead argued that the media are misrepresenting him, and claimed they are partisan or simply corrupt. In fact, those institutions are neither, and the President is an amoral demagogue bent only on aggrandizing himself and his power. In this he resembles the disgraced Nixon very closely. And very like Nixon, too, Trump is maintaining the steady political support of a minority of the citizenry, irrespective of the many moral outrages he has committed in his eight months in office and continues to perpetrate.

Nixon left office under the certainty of impeachment, but, as I noted above, almost a quarter of the American public continued to support him notwithstanding. In light of Trump's present support of roughly 36 percent of Americans, and in the face of his much more public display of lies and efforts to undercut democratic norms, I am left with two difficult questions. First, will today's Congress and Supreme Court act to hold the President accountable as his behavior continues? And second, what will it take to convince those individuals now supporting a rudderless demagogue of the dangerousness of their complacency? History teaches that their stance, however rationalized, could prove very costly indeed.

(Originally published October 8, 2017)

Notes

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² Burns, Ken and Lynn Novick: "The Vietnam War, Episode 7: The Veneer of Civilization." Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war/episodes/episode-7/>.

³ The Richard Nixon Foundation's comments on this episode and narrative may be found here: "The Vietnam War-Errors and Omissions," The Richard Nixon Foundation, September 25, 2017. Available at: <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2017/09/the-vietnam-war-errors-and->

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⁴ Burns, Ken and Lynn Novick: “The Vietnam War, Episode 9: A Disrespectful Loyalty.” Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war/episodes/episode-9/>.

⁵ Burns and Novick, Episode 9.

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109 Reflections on Capacity Building and Community Change

The organizers of this conference¹ have asked that I address “Economic Development and Capacity Building” and, for me, that title implies a focus on developing nations. It also suggests the need for some sort of change—that would be the development part—and the need for means to achieve it—the capacity building element. In addition to denoting change, capacity building and development also entail learning. They do so, at least implicitly, as to learn, one must reflect on where one now stands, consider how a possible idea or course might shift that stance and what it might portend for you against some set of criteria, rational and otherwise, and then take steps to adopt new actions, behaviors and values to realize a new path. All of those things demand conscious cognition. So, it follows that capacity building for development requires at least that a targeted population adapt in new ways to its present circumstances. For example, when a nongovernmental organization (NGO) or government introduces water by pump and sanitary facilities to a community that had neither of these, the question is not merely one of information, but of systematically helping an affected population become aware of those technologies and how they can change the quality of their lives, and the rationale for each in their lived circumstances. None of these steps is automatic when one has had no knowledge of those possibilities before, and it can be easy to reject the new as alien, and to revert instead to what is known and long accepted. Development history is littered with examples of just this story and permutations of it in any domain you might wish to consider; agriculture, education, sanitation, housing and so on.

On reflection, it might seem obvious that development requires adaptive change on the part of the targeted populations in more than merely technical ways, since how one lives one’s life and views one’s place in the world do not stop at one’s workplace door, wherever that may be. Change of any sort, in this view, will likely require reflecting on existing values, norms and mores and reconstituting and reimagining those in light of the suggested innovation. Sometimes this may be easier than others, but it is rarely a matter of simply promoting a change, arguing it will make community or individual life more efficient, and seeing the initiative widely accepted and adopted.

Indeed, if change is disruptive, we might not expect it to go easily. Those advocating for the horseless carriage, as early automobiles were called, were derided as starry eyed and more than a bit dizzy, when cars were first introduced. Even when the new-fangled machines began to prove their capabilities, many people were slow to adopt the innovation as they perceived it a threat to their known way of life.

Just so. Much change that developers/capacity builders would bring to a community not only disrupts residents' processes of accomplishing tasks, but also how people conceive of those undertakings in the light of how they make sense of the world. Bringing trade to communities that had only known barter and subsistence does not just yield "development" in some technical connotation, but literally destroys the only way of life that residents in such communities had ever known.

I am not being romantic about untouched cultures. Rather, I am making the basic point that all development is likely to require cultural change, and that shift is likely to be adaptive in character to varying degrees. That means a supposed "technical" capacity-building endeavor, such as bringing drip irrigation or new stove technology to communities, cannot simply be mechanical, nor a matter of sharing relevant information, since each addition changes the way residents see and reside within their life worlds.

If this is true, and all of the evidence I can find suggests that it is, then it follows that our dominant approach to technical assistance and capacity building for development must be rethought. That logic, rests on neoliberal assumptions, now roughly 50 years old, that prize efficiency as the central or core form of valuation of anything and argues that markets should be employed for as much social decision-making as possible. But decades of pressing those claims in development has yielded mountains of failure, even as it has systematically devalued the cultures and beliefs of those it has targeted. More, it has so prized efficiency as to lose sight often of its consequences for justice in the affected societies. That should not surprise us, I suppose, since if one argues change is technical and merely requires some form of brief education, why would one be concerned that innovation might yield broader and deeper consequences? And indeed, that assumption has long been held, and is still regnant, for many engaged in development today.

There is an important corollary to the point I have made that almost all change is adaptive. At least in democratic societies, such shifts must first be adopted by the individuals affected by them. That is, ultimately those

targeted to adopt a new “innovation” and whose capacity we wish to build, will arbitrate whether and how that change is realized. As such, their needs, behaviors, values, fears, prejudices and expectations will leaven how they perceive a change. And that fact will determine whether it is adopted and diffused or partially accepted or resisted and so on.

But, of course, if developers need to work to include the constituency whose capacities they would build in their efforts to design innovations, that itself is a deep challenge, as any of you who have sought to offer participatory space in projects in which you have been involved could attest. A whole host of factors mediate the relationship between would-be change agents and those selected for assistance, including whether they can come to a measure of trust, can come to shared understanding of purposes, can clarify potential desired implications and those devoutly to be avoided, and so on. None of these efforts is automatic and none are purely technical, but all are vital, and all must be contextualized to the lived experiences of those targeted. Only those individuals can definitively suggest what that means, notwithstanding the good will and empathy and good intentions of those seeking the change, i.e., the developers or capacity builders.

That fact implies that real-world capacity building is, in fact, still more complex than what I have outlined thus far, since communities and their needs are rarely homogeneous and there are also multiple influences at play on whether individuals in a community can or will be able and willing to adopt a new belief or changed behavior or process or the like. Women in many cultures, for example, are often simply not permitted to play any but specifically assigned and often subservient roles. Western style health initiatives may first need approval from traditional healers before they will be trusted by the residents of communities in many nations. Likewise, it may take many pilot projects to persuade farmers that a new technology, seed or planting style is worth the risk of not knowing its likely harvest outcome compared to existing practice. I could multiply these examples, but I hope it is clear that those whose capacities we seek to develop are not individualistic automatons. They are instead a part of social structures, and it is the sinews of those constructions and the ontologies that underpin them that often drive their reaction to offered change. And most of those mediating claims, developers cannot determine and ethically, perhaps should not seek to shape even when they can, if they wish to honor the dignity of those whom they purportedly are seeking to serve.

While I might deepen and develop this discussion further, I hope it suffices to show that

- Capacity building cannot and should not be conceived as a technical enterprise driven by efficiency claims alone and when that is so, it will most likely fail;
- In any case, populations are unlikely so to regard change;
- Individuals should not be seen as lone, but social actors whose actions are likely to be shaped by the dominant values and norms of the local societies of which they are a part;
- Those ways of knowing the world are often profoundly held and “sticky,” so most capacity building is unlikely to be accomplished along rationalistic pre-planned log frame/PERT (program evaluation and review technique) chart timelines.

Finally, capacity building must be said to have implications for justice in the communities it affects because it will shape social relationships within them, another and compelling rationale for involving aid beneficiaries in efforts to plan change interventions in their communities even as that fact complicates immensely the tasks and project and ethical responsibilities of the would-be capacity-builders, who must now work with affected populations and not merely deliver a “product.”

Taken together, these characteristics imply that capacity building must be considered very differently from today’s still dominant view that it should be planned by technically superior Westerners and delivered to “needy” recipients and evaluated against a criterion of efficiency alone. It also contravenes the reigning view that projects can be linearly implemented and their length and character planned alone by those offering them.

In lieu of these characteristics, one might expect capacity building to be:

- A messy process of mutual social learning characterized by fits and starts and, as often, by misapprehension as understanding;
- Evolutionary and adaptive in character;
- Charged with equity and ethical concerns;
- Mediated by a host of cultural and political factors, including of course, questions of social power and privilege.

I think this complex portrait of capacity building, albeit brief, comports with the reality of such initiatives as professionals pursue them in the field. Hopefully, increased awareness of the realities of these dynamics will engender a greater sensitivity among those seeking change and a deeper understanding of the needs and vulnerabilities of those whom they would serve. It seems that just and ethical behavior demand no less and that, in any case, and simply as a practical matter, effectiveness requires it as well. In an article published in 1957, Martin Luther King Jr. argued in the midst of the civil rights struggle in the United States, that those pursuing change needed to “wage the struggle with dignity and discipline.”² And if they were able to do so wisely and courageously, the result would be a “bright daybreak of freedom and justice.”³ A useful conclusion for these remarks today is to suggest that those seeking to build capacities for community change would do well to exhibit the same tenacity and perseverance and the same abiding regard for human dignity that King so powerfully articulated.

(Originally published October 22, 2017)

Notes

¹ Stephenson, Max Jr. 2017. “Reflections on Capacity Building and Community Change,” Global Leadership, Empowerment and Diversity Summit, Keynote speaker. October 18-19, 2017, Arlington, Virginia, October 18.

² King, Martin Luther, Jr. 1957. “Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” *Christian Century*, February 7. Available at: <http://lib.tcu.edu/staff/bellinger/rel-viol/MLK-1957.pdf>

³ King, Martin Luther, Jr. “Nonviolence and Racial Justice.”

110 On Human Cruelty and Alterity

I learned recently that all of the lectionary-based Christian denominations active in the United States—which include Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans and Episcopalians, among others—shared the same Old Testament reading from the Book of Exodus in the Bible, with their congregations during the October 28-29, 2017, weekend. Those in the assemblies heard the following:

Thus says the Lord:

‘You shall not molest or oppress an alien,

for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.

You shall not wrong any widow or orphan.

If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me,

I will surely hear their cry.

My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword;

Then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans.¹

Regardless of whether one believes in a Supreme Deity or in a God that will intervene in human affairs to kill individuals guilty of visiting wrongs on specific others, this passage is striking for what it suggests about human behavior. Most Biblical scholars now believe that portions of the Book of Exodus, including this one, were written in approximately 950 BCE. This suggests that approximately 3,000 years ago, the Israelites’ leaders saw it as necessary to inform their tribes that God’s certain vengeance supported a moral claim and social norm that individuals not discriminate against others in their midst on the basis of their origins or, more broadly, their alterity or “otherness.” Put differently, the passage reminds its readers that humans’ propensity to discriminate against the alien was sufficiently common that such behavior had become the subject of moral rebuke and admonition, to the point of promising death, were individuals found guilty of such actions.

Closer to home and in our time, President Donald Trump has, in his efforts to mobilize political support, made it an article of faith to attack the

“alien” in the United States as a persistent threat to public security and as a constant economic predator. The President has called on Americans to fear strangers and to build walls against them, both real and metaphoric. More specifically, he has repeatedly demanded construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexican border to prevent unwanted “others” from entering this nation, called for an end to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration policy, sought to issue a ban on travel for individuals from a select list of “othered” nations, and halved the number of refugees to be admitted to the United States annually. He has not yet gained formal government consent for the first three of these items, but public opinion polls suggest that roughly a third of Americans support these stands on the basis of a shared fear and loathing of the groups Trump has attacked. They support the President’s claims in the abstract and on the basis of fear of difference, and they believe such individuals are somehow depriving them of economic goods (through taxation) or opportunity (by “taking” jobs they otherwise might be able to obtain) or both. There is no truth in the President’s assertions, but that fact has meant nothing to those supporters willing to embrace hatred and to abuse people they perceive as threateningly different from themselves. In that, those now supporting Trump’s contentions are no different from the individuals whom the author of the Exodus passage sought to exhort concerning the dangerousness of their behavior so long ago.

A closer examination of Trump’s policy arguments concerning refugees reveals their emptiness and points up the vapidness of his larger related assertions. The United States resettled 26,124 individual refugees in fiscal year 2015 and 84,994 such persons in 2016.² These numbers compare to a U.S. labor market containing 156,993,000 working individuals in June 2015 and 158,889,000 in June 2016.³ The percentage of the national work force represented by refugees in either of these recent illustrative years was, quite literally, infinitesimal. Nonetheless, Trump has argued that this tiny group of individuals represents so great a threat to Americans’ physical and economic security as to demand that much lower numbers be allowed into the nation. Again, there is no evidence for either argument. Exactly one known former refugee has committed an act of public violence in the United States during the last decade, compared to the thousands of such incidents perpetrated by native citizens during the same period. Likewise, while Americans provide modest assistance to refugees as they resettle, all evidence suggests that such individuals routinely soon transition to becoming contributing

taxpayers and that they continue as such across their lives.⁴ There is simply no basis for a contrary claim, other than fear mongering and scapegoating and that is, indeed, what the President has undertaken and continues to embrace concerning this population. He is adroitly using dread of the alien, of difference, to engender in at least a share of Americans a completely unfounded and cruel fear and hatred.

Given these paradoxical realities—that Trump’s claims are factually empty, while his monstrous assertions are nonetheless given credence by many—one is led to reflect both on the abiding propensity of human beings to “fear and loathe the alien” that would create this circumstance, and on how it might be addressed so as to prevent deepening its negative consequences for our nation. That is, the question Trump’s continuing invocation of hatred has raised is whether the United States will succumb to the same ruthless vacuity of which the Exodus author warned. One may hope that Trump’s mendacity can be addressed, at least partly, by consistent efforts to inform the public of the facts and of reality, as against his false and inflammatory rhetoric. But this remedy is not likely alone to persuade a share of those supporting the President’s incendiary claims to change their view, as ideology and Trump’s constant rhetoric concerning allegedly “fake news” have combined to convince many citizens that anything contrary to what the President says cannot be true.⁵ For others who support Trump’s assertions, including a share of the nation’s Roman Catholics and Evangelical Christians, the President’s behavior is acceptable, however morally and ethically abhorrent and completely contrary to their faith’s teachings, as long as Trump takes stands they favor and they believe themselves better situated to attain and maintain a modicum of influence in policy-making as a result of his positions. Folk wisdom has long suggested the pursuit of power can be an alluring and morally poisonous elixir. Indeed, when combined with humanity’s propensity to “other the alien,” it has emerged as a force that now threatens to sever the very sinews that bind the diverse people that constitute our nation.

(Originally published November 6, 2017)

Notes

¹ Exodus 22:20-26, *The New American Bible*, (South Bend, Indiana: Greenlawn Press, 1991).

² Zong, Jie and Jeanne Batalova. 2017. “Refugees and Asylees in the United States,” *Migration Policy Institute*, June 7. Available at:

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states>.

³ Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training, “United States Labor Force Statistics.” Available at: <http://www.dlt.ri.gov/lmi/laus/us/usadj.htm>.

⁴ New American Economy, “From Struggle to Resilience: The Economic Impact of Refugees in America,” June 19, 2017. Available at: <http://www.newamericaneconomy.org/from-struggle-to-resilience-the-economic-impact-of-refugees-in-america/>.

⁵ French, David. 2017. “Mueller’s Investigation Won’t Shake Trump’s Base,” *The New York Times*, October 30. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/opinion/mueller-trump-supporters.html>.

111 Reflections on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address at Thanksgiving

When I was a child, one rite of passage for all students attending my elementary school involved memorizing and reciting President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. I have since learned that this requirement was not unique to my experience. Indeed, I have read many accounts of others who recall undertaking it. In fact, my brother, four years my senior, also studied and publicly recited the speech. I remember watching and listening to him as he prepared to do so. Here is the full text of Lincoln's unforgettable remarks as he dedicated the Soldiers National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on November 19, 1863, on the site of that terrible Civil War battle:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have

a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.¹

I want to focus on two phrases in Lincoln's speech and compare their meaning and portent to our present national governance conversation as our country prepares to celebrate its Thanksgiving holiday. Lincoln began his address by suggesting that the United States was founded on the proposition that all people are created equal. By comparison, our current historical moment finds the President of the United States daily excoriating one individual or group or another as unequal and unworthy, in his ongoing efforts to polarize the population and provide grist for the sense of anger and sense of grievance so evident among his core supporters. He has attacked the grieving widows of combat veterans, African Americans as a class and as individuals, war heroes who endured torture for their country and so on. For Trump, whatever is up is down so long as he can divide and rouse anger among his followers by pressing a claim. More deeply, in all of these choices, the President has daily fundamentally and repeatedly repudiated Lincoln's argument that the American nation was founded on the basis of human dignity and equality. Trump has done so most obviously perhaps by refusing to condemn the white nationalist hate mongers in Charlottesville, Virginia this past summer. Instead, he declared them morally equivalent to those who opposed them. The neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan devotees and white supremacists who marched down the Lawn of the University of Virginia brandishing torches and chanting anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant slogans represent a cancer on the body politic and a force for hate and disunity. Nonetheless, Trump degraded himself and the country by refusing to uphold the national premise that all people are created equal that Lincoln had so eloquently articulated in his speech at Gettysburg.

Lincoln also contended that the nation could best honor the thousands who died on that battlefield by rededicating itself to individual freedom and rights and to a nation that would and could continue to uphold those for all. In contrast, in his first 300 days in office, Trump has scapegoated specific groups in society and called actively and repeatedly for a diminution of their rights and for usurpation of the Constitution and its underlying principles of freedom of speech and the press. As noted above, Trump's targets for hate have included immigrants, African Americans and countless other citizens whose voting rights he has vigorously sought to impair or diminish in practice. He has also sought to treat transgender troops serving

honorably in the military as undeserving of full citizenship rights and more. Far from seeking to press a message of unity predicated on the extension and protection of rights for all Americans as a matter of principle, regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity or any other characteristic, Trump has sought instead to defame and demean portions of the population. He has done so in the name of a vicious and vacuous partisanship and under the cover of a specious claim of a stance of anti-political correctness. His often far-fetched and hypocritical stands constitute invitations for Americans to tear down the edifice of common political rights and shared governance responsibility to which Lincoln referred so memorably.

Trump's presidency represents a test of whether the American people are any longer capable of self-governance. Lincoln argued that those who died at Gettysburg could best be venerated by ensuring that the democratic regime for which they had fought and died endured. He was also clear that only the nation's self-governing populace could ensure that result and that that possibility would constitute a major ongoing challenge. Today, roughly 37 percent of Americans continue to be held in thrall by Trump's demagoguery and in turn are holding the nation's governing political party hostage to their stance.

It remains to be seen whether this share of the citizenry can be roused from their peculiar species of torpor or whether the nation will ultimately see the final degradation of the institutions for which so many fell at Gettysburg. Lincoln saw the cataclysm of the Civil War as the ultimate test of our mettle as a people, but perhaps that was not so. Today, we are witnessing a far more insidious assault on self-governance and the nation as a share of the population seems willing voluntarily to cede their birthright of citizenship and freedom in support of an immoral and hate-filled demagoguery. The current conflict concerning the future of the American experiment is not being waged by military forces, but in the hearts and minds, particularly, of just over a third of the body politic. One must hope the outcome of this contest will ultimately favor freedom, but current trends are hardly auspicious.

I could never have imagined as a child that I would be writing these words and referring to Lincoln's profound declaration in the hope of awakening some small number to the danger now befalling their polity. As I do so, I remain forever grateful to the teacher who required that I begin to grapple with the fragile underpinnings of our shared democracy by reflecting on Lincoln's terse evocation of them so many years ago. Our country is nearing

its commemoration of Thanksgiving as I write, first celebrated as an annual national holiday only a few days after Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg. The nation then remained riven and at war. One may hope that this special day set aside for thanks will this year help to mend the deep-seated anger and division again so palpable in the country.

(Originally published November 19, 2017)

Notes

¹ Lincoln, Abraham. 1863. "The Gettysburg Address," November 19. Abraham Lincoln Online. Available at: <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>.

112 Fear and the Moral Imagination: The Oil and Water of Democratic Self-Governance

The current issue of the United States Holocaust Museum's magazine, *Memory & Action*, features an article on the public outrage that arose in this country when early news of systematic Nazi persecution of Jews and other groups began to reach America in 1933.¹ Indeed, Rebecca Erbelding's essay reports that "thousands of Americans attended anti-Nazi marches and rallies throughout the United States" (in at least 29 states) during that year.² One such rally in New York City on May 10, 1933 drew more than 100,000 citizens. But the outpouring of concern did not last and was not reflected in official government policy. A new exhibition opening in 2018 at the Museum will detail both the nation's initial popular reaction to the growing evil in Germany and the reasons why historians believe it withered. That fact has left the United States with the agonizing question of whether the movement's continuation might have made any difference in diminishing or perhaps even forestalling the horror that followed. While the exhibit will provide a fuller portrait of how and why the early furor concerning Nazi persecutions arose and evanesced in the United States, Erbelding provided two notable related explanations in her article,

Americans in 1933 were deeply afraid. They were afraid of being dragged into international conflicts: in the 1930s, Congress passed neutrality laws with overwhelming bipartisan support, proclaiming that the United States would remain isolated. ... Many Americans also were afraid of anyone they perceived as different or foreign and many considered nonwhites as inferior. Throughout the 1930s, Congress could not pass an anti-lynching bill, Jim Crow laws (and customs) reigned in many parts of the country; and Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American citizens were forcibly deported from California.³

I found this argument especially striking given that just days ago the Trump administration announced it would forcibly require 59,000 Haitians previously allowed entry to the United States on humanitarian grounds to

return to their hurricane devastated and deeply impoverished native country within the next 18 months. Stripped to its essentials, the “grounds” for this policy shift rest on an unfounded and unimaginative fear of “others” who do not look like the overwhelming share of President Donald Trump’s supporters. Trump’s action, in short, seems designed to exploit the basest of his supporters’ instincts and fears concerning social change and alterity. In another echo of 1933, the President has also sought to withdraw from an array of previous national commitments, including the Paris Climate Accord and the Transpacific Partnership. He has sought to justify these anti-internationalist steps as “putting American interests first.” At bottom, in fact, they reflect an isolationist fear of international engagement.

On the same day that I came across the *Memory & Action* piece, I read a devastating negative review by the distinguished theological thinker, David Bentley Hart, of a new book whose authors had sought to produce a volume justifying the death penalty on the basis of Christian teaching.⁴ According to Hart, their effort did not succeed on any level. Notably, among Hart’s many concerns was this one:

Among principled opponents of the death penalty, very few could be accused of nurturing any tender illusions regarding the deeds or characters of violent criminals. Moreover, whenever one party to a debate dismisses the ethical concerns of the other side [as this volume’s authors did] as ‘sentimental,’ it is usually an indication of the former’s inferior moral imagination.⁵

Hart’s comment on the character of the argument and authors he was reviewing, coupled with awareness of the American experience in 1933 and Trump’s behavior today, points to a deeper reality: Abstract and absolutist claims, often predicated on raw fear, that seek to eradicate the possibility of a mutuality arising from shared humanity are the enemy of the moral imagination, that fabric of norms and values that joins citizens together and on which democratic self-governance ultimately rests. Here is how Edmund Burke, the architect of the idea of the moral imagination, described the concept in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it

to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as ridiculous, absurd and antiquated fashion. ... On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy, which is the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings, and which is as void of solid wisdom, as it is destitute of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported only by their own terrors, and by the concern, which each individual may find in them from his own private interests. In the groves of their academy, at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows. Nothing is left behind which engages the affections on the part of the commonwealth.⁶

Today, it appears that Trump daily seeks foremost to appeal to his supporters' fears of social and economic change as well as their willingness to scapegoat and discriminate against specific groups to "explain" and allay those concerns. The president has used economic and social anxieties and animosity to justify his attacks on the nation's principal institutions and capacity for individual and collective moral imagination.

To be sure, Trump's consistent willingness to exploit a share of the citizenry's fears and prejudices for political gain—that is, to work actively to cloud and truncate Americans' potential for moral imagination by appealing to their darkest concerns and ugliest proclivities—highlights his own dearth of that capacity. Nonetheless, the president's smallness and cruelty do not explain why many would choose to respond favorably to his attacks on others in American society on the basis of their perceived differences. Put differently, fear need not lead to scapegoating and hate mongering, but it clearly has in the current circumstance, and it did so during the Great Depression years as well. Moreover, as Burke realized, those who are made symbols or objects of fear and loathing need bear no relation to the problems they are said to represent. Instead, they are persecuted because it is alluring and easy for leaders and some citizens to maltreat "othered" and often powerless individuals to help make false and simple sense of their own roiling worlds.

This discussion suggests that a central question confronting our polity today, now headed by a leader disposed to attack the bonds that join Americans amongst themselves and with the world, is where those desiring to stop such empty assaults may find leaders able to offer a different vision of the nation, one that stresses and nurtures those ties. Trump has shown he is prepared to violate human rights and vitiate civic connections alike

as he pursues opportunities to feed the anger of his base of supporters. A key challenge for the polity now is whether other Republican leaders who recognize the danger that othering and fear-filled discriminatory behavior represent can bring an alternative vision for the nation forward and press it effectively within the Party and beyond. So far, at least, few elected officials in Trump's party appear willing to play such a role. Assuming those individuals cannot or will not do so, the responsibility will lie with Democratic Party leaders to identify individuals who can describe the peril now at hand for the country and chart steps to address it in a way compelling to the majority of the nation's citizenry. Whatever their origins or partisan cast, the nation now urgently needs public leaders with moral imagination to help the country regain its balance and perspective and to ensure its prospects for continued self-governance. The risk to the Republic is too high to allow the present situation to continue unchecked.

(Originally published December 4, 2017)

Notes

¹ Erbelding, Rebecca. 2017. "1933: How did Americans React?" *Memory and Action*, Fall. Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, p. 16.

² Erbelding, "1933," p. 16.

³ Erbelding, "1933," p.15.

⁴ Hart, David Bentley. 2017. "Christians & the Death Penalty: There is no Patron Saint of Executioners," *Commonweal*, December 1, pp. 16-21.

⁵ Hart, "Christians & the Death Penalty," p.16.

⁶ Burke, Edmund. 1973. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Garden City New York: Anchor Books, pp.90-91.

113 Revisiting a Central Puzzle of Democracy and of Current U.S. Politics

One of the enduring enigmas of Donald Trump's presidency is the strong support he continues to receive from white working-class voters who live in rural areas that have suffered catastrophic economic decline in recent decades as globalization has proceeded and the character of the United States economy has changed. Trump has enjoyed that following even as he has embraced policy positions and taken regulatory steps antithetical to the interests and welfare of those offering it. In any case, the evidence suggests that the nation's thoroughly globalized knowledge-driven economy will continue to be based in its largest cities and that those urban centers are no longer tied tightly to the hinterland, as once they were, to produce the goods and services they create.¹

Meanwhile, a disproportionate share of Trump devotees resides in just such rural and non-urban areas. Today's growing cities are connected to similar cities around the globe, and while the wealth they are creating is staggeringly large, those developing the innovations resulting in that income are not sharing it via co-production with Appalachia's unemployed miners, or the struggling fishing-dependent families of Maine or the often-unemployed timber workers of the Northwest. Nor, are they providing it to many other hard-hit communities in the Midwest that have lost their traditional manufacturing economic base. As a result, a share of the citizens of those jurisdictions who have suffered swift negative economic change have all but lost hope and have become willing to resent the "elites" in the nation's wealthy large cities and see those urban residents as depriving them of their livelihoods and viewing their declining way of life with condescension. Here is how an Associated Press reporter, Claire Galofaro, visiting Sandy Hook, a small (population 678) once thriving, but now economically reeling coal mining community in Eastern Kentucky, made this point and suggested its political implications recently:

Despite the President's [Trump's] dismal approval ratings and lethargic legislative achievements, he remains popular here in this

small isolated county located in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. ... Trump doesn't shoulder the blame [for their community's continuing travails] because the allegiance to him is as emotional as it is economic. It means God, guns, patriotism. It means tearing down the political system that neglected them in favor of cities that feel a world away.²

This perspective suggests that Washington politicians and the denizens of large cities allowed devastating economic change to happen to this population and then sneered at those mired in its terrible effects. More, these rural citizens are willing to accept Donald Trump's claims that elected officials and urban Americans adopted those shifts to reap profit for themselves and to help "others" (foreign powers, immigrants and people of color). Those individuals who buy into Trump's assertions also believe that there are simple answers to the economic situation they find themselves confronting that Trump may realize by sheer force of will. Scapegoating cities as "cesspools," as Trump and these followers have done, is not new to American politics; nor is the President's xenophobia novel in United States history, nor, sadly, is his racism new. Each of these forms of appeal has nevertheless plainly struck a chord with many residents of these hard-hit communities.

These individuals continue vigorously to support a President embracing these ugly and false claims even as he has proposed eliminating the health care insurance support on which many of them depend, and has continued to work to undermine it when his effort to eliminate it failed. In addition, they follow a man who has proposed shuttering the national programs that have been crucial to such efforts as have occurred to generate alternative economies in their communities. More, many in this population support a chief executive who has lied to them consistently on matters large and small and who recently cheered his Party's effort to enact a massive tax reduction that will disproportionately favor corporations and the nation's most wealthy (the imagined evil doers Trump is supposedly otherwise combating) while adding more than \$1 trillion to the country's deficit during the next decade. And they cheer a leader whose party representatives have suggested that a large tax cut was important principally because GOP donors wanted it and had threatened not to continue to give to election campaigns if it did not occur. Finally, neither Trump nor his party have explained what they could actually do to "bring the old jobs back" in Appalachia and elsewhere, other

than to scapegoat others for their loss, even as they propose depriving those affected of public support. Given these confounding facts, it is more than puzzling why anyone residing in these areas would believe Trump's claims, let alone cleave to him emotionally as a beacon of hope.

Yet, according to recent national Gallup polling, roughly 37 percent of Americans support Trump.³ It is clear that a solid share of those individuals believe his assertions, and they see his narcissism and finger-pointing nativism and racism as bracing and confirmation that he is "fighting" for them, even as all empirical evidence suggests he is not. The puzzle, as Galofaro learned when visiting Kentucky, is discerning how this can be so. While I am sure some affected Americans desire simple explanations for what is occurring in their towns and/or are content to embrace xenophobia and racism as palliatives, I am equally certain that a share of Trump's supporters are not simply racists or white nationalists. Rather, the President's followers in places like Sandy Hook appear to be separating Trump from his expressed ideas and, indeed, from the GOP even as, ironically, he has embraced that Party's ideological disposition to redistribute income upward and to reduce government support for their communities at a time they most require such assistance. Perhaps, as Galofaro found, the attachment for many is emotional and they want desperately to believe someone who promises magically to control global change and recreate the ways of life they once knew.

I suspect all of these "explanations" contain some truth. And I do not doubt that other rationales and rationalizations (a very different, but relevant point) may also be helpful as ways to understand these voters' behavior. Lately, I have been reflecting on the power and character of political communication as a significant shaping factor in Trump's support among the white working class in depressed communities. I do not mean to reference the by now well-known phenomenon of "narrow casting" or "echo chamber" communication, in which individuals may select such information outlets as they find accord with their ideological or other predispositions due to the explosion of sources of information and the availability of what are, in many cases, essentially propaganda outlets for specific groups and causes, including for Trump. This shift in the structure of mass communications is vitally important, but I want here instead to point to the critical role of an assumption or disposition that underpins all of human communication that British theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has highlighted.

Williams has suggested that freedom ultimately depends on the fact that another person gives you an opportunity to respond by listening to you, even when that individual is prepared only to disagree with you.⁴ In plain terms, the fact that he or she is listening provides an opportunity for you to speak. Were they not offering you such consideration, your language literally could have no effect and no meaning. In this way, language creates space for democratic possibility through the antecedent condition of listening required for dialogic exchange. But this freedom is not absolute, as one's speech must be recognizable and intelligible to the other if they are to listen meaningfully. That is, mutual human interdependence presupposes and demands a prior condition of intelligibility for all of its exchange. As theologian and political thinker John Courtney Murray remarked nearly 60 years ago,

Barbarism likewise threatens when men cease to talk together according to reasonable laws. There are laws of argument, the observance of which is imperative if discourse is to be civilized. Civility dies with the death of dialog.⁵

That is, if the “other” in this metaphoric conversation does not or cannot countenance your communication on the basis of a prior acknowledgment of your right to offer it, the very possibility of freedom may enervate and turn, at its extremes, either into a hardened state of sullen silence or a cacophony of competing claimants shouting into an abyss. Either of these situations ends the possibility for human freedom, as it imagines that construct to be the result of an atomistic act, which it cannot be, as there must always be others with whom one must interact in society in order to be fully alive and fully human. Indeed, freedom may not exist without an acknowledgment that its realization depends on others. Even to imagine other possibilities is to depart from reality into fantasy and to mar the prospect for both freedom and democracy in so doing.

In short, as a share of Trump's supporters adopt his arguments that “others” have willingly and knowingly placed them in their difficult economic straits, and forswear at the same time an inclination to acknowledge more complex or alternative explanations for the challenges they are experiencing, they relinquish the possibility of democracy itself. Even as today's canalized news feeds this propensity among citizens, it is this step to refuse to recognize alternate lenses and views that imperils freedom. It

is this disposition, too, that provides Trump leeway and capacity to attack freedom of speech and of the press and to lie repeatedly to his supporters concerning the purport of his and his party's actions for their communities and daily lives.

Trump has argued that this proclivity among his followers cannot be changed, and that he could shoot someone on a central New York City street and his supporters would countenance his behavior. Perhaps, but if so, we are witnessing the death knell of the possibility of freedom itself among this segment of our nation's population. To say this possibility is perversely ironic and paradoxical is to understate reality, as, for the most part, no portion of America's citizenry is more beleaguered, more innocent of the conditions that created their predicament or more desirous of serving the larger cause of their nation.

This analysis points up the central significance of the fact that, as Aristotle long ago argued, humans are innately social animals. It also underscores how misleading and problematic for freedom the modern capitalist and liberal idea that they are automatons can be. And it suggests the importance of leader intentionality for the health of democratic institutions. Given humanity's propensity to desire simple narrative explanations for all that befalls it, elected leaders can seek to exploit that tendency and tap into the fear and emotion that crave such simplicities and provide succor to hate and to "othering."

Alternatively, they may seek to help those citizens understand their situations for what they are and address them as best they can as a people united in their shared desire for freedom. While intentionality is a necessary, but not sufficient condition to secure democratic freedom, attacking that social construct's fundamentals, as Trump continues to do, can only harm those moved by such arguments and impair our regime's capacity to ensure it for all of our citizens. The sad and self-damaging predicament of Trump's "base," as his most ardent adherents are so often labeled, illustrates both the profundity of this democratic imperative and the difficulty of achieving it when elected leaders pursue power or self-aggrandizement or any other aim in lieu of a sincere search for the public weal.

(Originally published January 8, 2018)

Notes

¹ Badger, Emily. 2017. "What Happens when the Richest U.S. Cities Turn to the World?" *The New York Times*, December 22. Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/22/upshot/the-great-disconnect-megacities-go-global-but-lose-local-links.html>.

² Galofaro, Claire. 2017. "Base Maintains Connection with Trump," *The Roanoke Times*, December 27, p. A-5.

³ Gallup Organization. 2017. "Presidential Approval Ratings–Donald Trump." Available at: <http://news.gallup.com/poll/203198/presidential-approval-ratings-donald-trump.aspx>.

⁴ Williams, Rowan. 2011. *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, pp.1-14.

⁵ Murray, John Courtney. 1960. "We Hold these Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition, John Courtney Murray, 1960." Harvard University: The Pluralism Project. Available at: <http://pluralism.org/document/we-hold-these-truths-catholic-reflections-on-the-american-proposition-john-courtney-murray-1960/>.

114 On Human Darkness and Democratic Possibility

Author and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Wiesel brought awareness to a reluctant world of the enormity of the horrors of the Holocaust. Before he died at 87 on July 2, 2016, he addressed the challenge he had set himself of preventing a recurrence of those events by repeatedly illustrating the depths of evil and depravity to which humans may stoop when fearful or power hungry or convinced of the inhumanity of those they are persecuting, or indeed, combinations of these factors. In his seminal book, *Night*, a searing account of his experience as a prisoner of the Nazi terror, Wiesel wrote of his initial awareness of the unfathomable darkness innate to humanity and of its consequences for him, as he described his arrival at Auschwitz as one of more than 100 individuals pressed into a cattle car:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. ... Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. ... Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never.¹

Wiesel survived the death camps in which he was imprisoned and, once freed, he dedicated his life to efforts to ensure that human beings would never again allow themselves to perpetrate such evil and cruelty. Despite his efforts and those of many others, modern demagogues in the decades since World War II have systematically and savagely “othered” groups—as Hitler had othered the Jews—within their nations’ populations to curry fear and favor, and to gain or maintain power. Such has occurred in Burma, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Russia, Rwanda and Serbia, among other nations. These episodes cost millions their lives. Likewise, humankind’s capacity for malice and ignominy was on display during WWII in the United States with the internment of Japanese-Americans, and in the post-war years in the

American south, with its frequent lynchings of African Americans and systematic efforts to deny them their civil and human rights.

These examples might be expanded, but they suggest that when free to choose their course, humans may choose horrific behaviors, especially when encouraged to adopt such acts by those they would call leaders. This fact simply underscores what philosophers since the ancient Greeks have known: People may evidence supreme altruism and goodness, but are also equally capable of their opposite. If one would give individuals freedom to make such choices then, as in democracies, one must also find ways to ensure that they are equipped with the capacities necessary to act virtuously and to choose leaders willing to ensure the rights of all those they serve, irrespective of their gender, race or other characteristics.

The United States Constitution sought to address this challenge in part with its Bill of Rights, but those principles alone cannot prevent their usurpation by a leader or citizenry, or both, persuaded to “other” some communities in its midst, and to persecute or demean those groups or deprive them of their rights. Only citizens and their leaders devoted to the common weal and calling upon the “better angels of their natures,” as Abraham Lincoln observed in his First Inaugural Address, may ensure the realization of those aims.² Our polity now appears to be at a moment in which Americans must soon choose whether they wish to uphold the premises of their Constitution or instead watch as they are undermined. As people make that collective choice, they will also decide which trajectory of their natures they wish to embrace: that which allows them to continue together amidst their pluralism to forge a united nation, or that which tyrannizes some groups and, in so doing, costs all citizens their free society. This turning point has been both created and symbolized by President Donald Trump’s increasingly bold embrace of overt racism and systematic degradation of those who are not Caucasian, whether Americans or residents of other nations. The proximate question is of greatest moment for that minority of the nation’s populace supporting Trump and for his Party’s elites, the majority of whom have also continued to back Trump. The issue takes the guise of whether to excuse his ever more strident racism or to declare it and its purveyor unacceptable in the American polity.

We have arrived collectively at this moment as a nation in the wake of Trump claiming, baselessly, for several years, that then-President Barack Obama was not an American citizen. That lie, which sent a message to Trump’s audience that a black man could not legitimately serve as President,

was followed by racist comments aimed at Hispanics and immigrants as Trump began his presidential campaign. Once elected, Trump chose to embrace white nationalists and neo-Nazis last summer after the tragedy in Charlottesville, Virginia. In each case, as Trump has othered groups of Americans, he has appealed to his shrinking “base” of roughly a third of eligible voters by suggesting that they are innately superior and that those individuals he has singled out for derision were somehow responsible for any difficulties his supporters might be confronting.

Trump has chosen to add to this record of lies and calumny by demonizing and “othering” Haitians and Africans from “s**thole countries” during immigration policy talks at the White House recently.³ That is, the President has moved from dog whistling to some white individuals, especially to men with high school or less educations, playing on their fears of demographic group population composition change, to offering explicitly racist comments that demonize and undercut specific groups within American and/or global society.⁴ Given the fact that the U.S. citizenry is comprised of individuals of different races, ethnicities, national origins and religious beliefs, Trump is denying reality with these remarks, even as he is refusing to acknowledge the humanity and dignity of those he attacks. That is the nub of the matter. Like many racists before him, Trump is asking his supporters to imagine that those he maligns are less than human, and certainly that those not born with white skin are “less than,” as a result of that fact.

In so doing, he has attempted to appeal to citizens’ (and humanity’s) worst tendencies. Trump has asked Americans to demean and hate entire classes of people who appear superficially different from themselves on one basis or another so as to assuage fears or address concerns that have nothing to do with those groups, and certainly were not caused by their attributes. Trump’s appeals to racism and to the worst in Americans should give all of this nation’s citizens pause and perhaps remind them that the history of this country has been characterized by the slow extension of civil and human rights to all of its residents, and it is that trajectory and those victories, hard won and unevenly realized as they may be, that Trump’s ugly demagoguery now seeks to undermine and place at risk.

Having said this, it is important to note that Trump is the most unpopular President in modern history and that he lost the popular vote in 2016 by more than 2.9 million votes. Millions of Americans disagree with his policies and pronouncements and millions more are working each day to overcome his most egregiously cruel remarks and policies. At the same time, his party,

the GOP, is firmly in control of Congress and its leaders have steadfastly refused to criticize his actions, however outrageous, for fear of alienating the Republican voters supporting him and in the name of securing their own agendas. That silence cannot continue in light of the President's most recent pronouncements and behavior.

On April 4 of this year, the United States will commemorate the 50th anniversary of the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. As we do, we will recall King's work, as we recently did while celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. Day. King dedicated his life to securing full human and civil rights for African Americans and the poor in this nation. Trump has now openly attacked the ideas that King represented; that all human beings are created equal and equally free, and that all Americans should be given opportunities to succeed.

As we remember King during this moment of deep polarization in our polity, it might be well also to recall Robert Kennedy's remarks in Indianapolis, Indiana to a largely poor and black audience when he learned of King's death in 1968. Perhaps Kennedy's vision of generosity, empathy and hope on that terrible night can help the nation chart a course forward out of its current self-imposed darkness. In any case, we may all hope that Republican congressional and party leaders and Trump's most ardent supporters will reject his fresh appeal to racism in favor of a vision of the nation in all of its heterogeneity. Here is how Robert Kennedy framed the country's challenge in the wake of King's untimely death:

We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization—black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand, and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, compassion, and love. ... What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another; and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.⁵

Robert Kennedy trusted the American people to look forward with hope, openness and generosity. He called on the nation's citizens to embrace their remarkable diversity and to find ways to harness their collective energy to move ahead as one people. Trump's unconcealed smallness, malice and fearfulness directly contradict the American creed and its people's drive to realize a better and more unified future. One may hope that Republican office-holders and officials will soon see the wisdom of that vision of America and demand that Trump change course or disavow him.

(Originally published January 22, 2018)

Notes

¹ Wiesel, Elie. 1982. *Night*. New York: Bantam Books, p.32.

² Lincoln, Abraham. 1865. "Second Inaugural Address," in Fred Kaplan, ed., *A New Birth of Freedom: Selected Writings of Abraham Lincoln*. London: The Folio Society, 2015, p. 331.

³ Davis, Julie Hirschfeld, Gay Stolberg and Thomas Kaplan. 2018. "Trump Alarms Lawmakers with Disparaging Words for Haiti and Africa," *The New York Times*, January 11. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/11/us/politics/trump-shithole-countries.html>.

⁴ Weiner, Tim. 2016. *One Man Against the World: The Tragedy of Richard Nixon*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

⁵ Kennedy, Robert F. 1968. "Remarks on the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.," April 4, *American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches*. Available at: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkonmlkdeath.html>.

115 “Scraping off the Essence of Things”

The much-loved modern Irish lyrical poet and philosopher John O'Donohue died unexpectedly at 52 in January 2008. Prior to his passing, O'Donohue had been a frequent presence on RTÉ (Ireland's National Television and Radio broadcaster) to discuss his work and to share his insights. The texts of a share of those conversations, often hosted by John Quinn, were collected by that journalist in a volume entitled *Walking on the Pastures of Wonder* in 2015. One segment saw the poet reflecting on fear:

Fear is a force in human life that can turn that which is real, meaningful, warm, gentle and kind in your life into devastation and desert. It is a powerful force. ... It is the point at which wonder begins to consume itself and scrape off the essence of things. It begins to people realities with ghost figures. It makes the self feel vulnerable and it can take away loveliness from your experience and from your friendships, and even from your action and your work.¹

I find it fascinating that O'Donohue argued that fear clouds perception and judgment and, more deeply, can consume the individual experiencing or embracing it as he or she finds their very core beliefs corroded by suspicion and willingness to imagine the worst about even that which is wondrous in their lives. Fear surely creates vulnerability, even as it fuels that emotion, and results in emptiness. It can likewise poison relationships and coarsen one's view of even positive experiences. In short, fear can, and often does, occlude reality while leaving those held in its thrall empty, pained and willing to jettison even their most ardently held values and norms in its name.

O'Donohue shared an old Indian story to illustrate the effects of fear on human beings:

The best story I know about fear is a story from India ... about a man condemned to spend a night in a cell with a poisonous snake. If he made the slightest little stir, the snake was on top of him and he was dead. ... As the first bars of light began to come into the cell at dawn, he began to make out the shape of the snake, and he was saying to himself, wasn't I lucky that I never stirred. But when the full force of

light came in with the dawn he noticed that it wasn't a snake at all. It was an old rope.²

The philosopher commented that while this tale may seem banal, its moral was anything but hackneyed. Indeed, "... in a lot of the rooms in our minds, there are harmless old ropes thrown in corners, but when our fear begins to work on them, we convert them into monsters who hold us prisoner in the bleakest, most impoverished rooms of our hearts."³

I want to argue that too many Americans are now living in desperate dread in the "most impoverished rooms of [their] hearts," as O'Donohue memorably described that state.⁴ This situation was born in the early 1970s when, following the rapid economic growth of the 1960s that found the United States astride the world, the nation was shocked by an oil embargo and by unprecedented simultaneous high levels of unemployment and inflation, so-called "stagflation."

This scenario arose as the country underwent the Watergate scandal and continued to be deeply polarized by the conflict in Vietnam. President Richard Nixon had exacerbated this social division in his campaigns in 1968 and 1972 by appealing to race and to a supposed "silent majority" willing to stand up against the claims of an undefined minority taking undue advantage of their good will. The abuse of social trust revealed by Watergate resulted in Nixon's resignation in 1974 amidst enduring damage to the regime's legitimacy.

In short, the early 1970s was a period of social disquiet, growing popular suspicion of American institutions and widespread division and conflict. Many citizens were shocked by the economic conditions they confronted and sought answers for the fears they experienced as a result. Ronald Reagan provided a simple explanation. The former actor and California governor suggested these difficulties were the fault of governance and democratic decision-making and could be "fixed" readily by sharply reducing the scope of government at all levels of society and by ever more thoroughly marketizing social decision-making. No matter that there was no empirical evidence for these claims, they soothed and offered a ready palliative for the fear millions now felt. Reagan handily won the presidency in 1980.

But while inflation and unemployment rates did slowly recede in the 1980s, many Americans nonetheless found themselves coping with unprecedented economic change, and the globalization resulting in those shifts quickened as the decade wore on. Indeed, many firms ceased operating in the United

States altogether and moved their plants overseas to save on production and/or labor costs. These trends continued apace in the 1990s and paradoxically, Reagan's Republican Party fought hard, on ideological grounds, to curtail or prevent public outlays to support Americans whose employment and livelihoods were adversely affected by those changes. This overall situation continued into the new millennium and was exacerbated by the terrorist attack in September 2001. Public disaffection with the George W. Bush administration slowly grew as the wars that president launched in Iraq and Afghanistan in the wake of that tragedy wore on without visible results and amidst continuing outcry that their originating rationale was baseless.

These long-term economic and political trends, exaggerated by the heightened fears wrought by the 2001 terrorist attack, found the United States body politic in a peculiarly vulnerable position as the 2008 Great Recession plunged the nation into an economic crisis without precedent in the post-World War II era. Once again, rather than support government action to address the economic calamity, the GOP fought hard to prevent first Bush and, thereafter, President Barack Obama from undertaking actions on a scale necessary to address fully the unemployment and dislocation wrought by the severe downturn. The Republican Party was now controlled by that faction of its membership that believed that governance and democratic choice-making were to be attacked at every turn and persistently described as illegitimate and deleterious forces.

This stance and the policy choices it occasioned deepened the suffering wrought by the downturn and extended its length for millions of Americans. More, as the nation began slowly to return to a more normal economic posture, growth occurred unevenly and overwhelmingly in the country's metropolitan centers, leaving many areas hard hit by continuing globalization in a state of ongoing economic and social decline.⁵ This combination of factors, heightened by decades of partisan efforts to attack the legitimacy of government and governance in society, found many citizens angry and deeply fearful as the 2016 national election approached. This situation was only strengthened by the reality that upwards of 80 percent of the wealth being created in the economy was now routinely captured by the nation's richest 1 percent.⁶

These trends and the fear they have produced and sustained—some the product of ideology and others of long-term social and economic change—opened space for Donald Trump's demagogic campaign in 2016 that

argued that he could magically ameliorate these long-term shifts and set them right by force of his will. Trump coupled these claims with arguments that those suffering economically should blame people of color and refugees and immigrants for their woes. He won the presidential election in the Electoral College by a very small margin while losing the overall popular vote. In consequence, the nation now has an unpopular President who daily lies to the citizenry on matters large and small, just as often attacks central regime values and has systematically taken steps to provide still more wealth-making opportunities and taxation advantages to the most-well off in society. Meanwhile, in sharp contrast, the roughly one-third of the citizenry supporting Trump hail disproportionately from economically hard-hit areas and have been willing to rationalize his most outrageous policy choices, racist and nativist outbursts in the hope that he can deliver economic possibility.

Put differently, in O'Donohue's terms, in their deep state of fear, many Americans have turned to a charlatan who peddles hate, and even as they embrace his fantastical view of reality, they and their nation are continuously diminished by it. Those Americans, now paralyzed by fear and willing to abandon their birthright to self-governance to a blowhard demagogue, are like the Indian man in the story O'Donohue shared, cowering in the corner of his cell and just as deeply misled by that state. The question now is whether the citizens in our nation captive to their fears can experience the equivalent of the dawning the Indian man experienced that will permit them to see the true character and costs of their blindness. As the old saying goes, the clock is ticking.

(Originally published February 5, 2018)

Notes

¹ O'Donohue, John. 2015. *Walking on the Pastures of Wonder*. Dublin: Veritas Publications, p.30.

² O'Donohue, *Walking on the Pastures*, pp. 31-32.

³ O'Donohue, *Walking on the Pastures*, p. 32.

⁴ O'Donohue, *Walking on the Pastures*, p. 32.

⁵ Badger, Emily. 2017. "What Happens when the Richest U.S. Cities Turn to the World?" *The New York Times*, December 22. Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/22/upshot/the-great-disconnect-megacities-go-global-but-lose-local-links.html>.

⁶ Kottasová, Ivana. 2018. "The 1% Grabbed 82% of all Wealth Created in

2017,” CNN Money, January 22. Available at: <http://money.cnn.com/2018/01/21/news/economy/davos-oxfam-inequality-wealth/index.html>.

116 On ‘Changemakers,’ Education and Democratic Self-Governance

New York Times writer Frank Bruni began his February 10, 2018 column with the following observation:

What a herky-jerky mess our federal government is. What a bumbling klutz. It can't manage health care. It can't master infrastructure. It can't fund itself for more than tiny increments of time. It can barely stay open. It shut down briefly on Friday for the second time in three weeks. Maybe it should just stay closed for good.¹

While this argument certainly captures the reader's attention, it is far too sweeping, even as an opening statement. There is no reason to suppose that government has suddenly broken or to adopt long-time Republican assertions that democratic governance has little or no place in our political economy, as Bruni seemed to do here. Instead, one must point to the choice by a share of our elected officials—particularly, though not exclusively GOP partisans—not to govern, or to govern with a corrosive and increasing cynicism aimed at manipulating the body politic for electoral or material gain.

That is, the situation Bruni highlighted has nothing to do with the innate capacity of self-governance per se to function and has everything to do with elected officials choosing not to govern. One must also recall that a share of the citizenry has installed the officials perpetrating this ongoing scenario and has often repeatedly returned them to those positions of trust, albeit often representing terribly gerrymandered jurisdictions. Put differently, none of the woes to which Bruni pointed *need* to occur, as they are *not* inherent to self-governance. The extent they are occurring owes everything to leaders' choices and their perception that hobbling democracy will be tolerated and will prove electorally beneficial and, for some at least, including the President, will be personally financially lucrative as well.

Bruni went on to observe that corporations are taking up some of the slack in domains, in education particularly, in which government has been faltering, very much in keeping with the Republican Party's regnant ideology that only market institutions possess legitimacy in society,

In an effort to make sure that employees have up-to-the-minute technical skills—or are simply adept at critical thinking and creative problem solving—more companies have developed academies of their own. That’s likely to accelerate.²

This contention struck me as strange, too, as it was offered at a time when American educational institutions at all levels have never focused more intensively on preparing students for jobs and offering purportedly “practical” workforce-related curricula. Bruni offered this argument concerning corporate substitution as tens of thousands of parents are sending their children to colleges and universities each year demanding not that these institutions educate their youths for life, professions and citizenship, but that they focus instead on providing the students “saleable” skills for their first position. For the lion’s share of those young adults, that will be with a for-profit business.

More broadly, the neoliberal public philosophy underpinning the claims that have prompted parents to advise their children that philosophy, literature and religion-related classes, among others, are of no practical value, has long promoted the commodification of knowledge. That cultural demand is now being pressed ever more relentlessly on educational institutions by employers and families alike. And make no mistake, those organizations have responded. Learning now is tested by and oriented toward examination as never before, and lawmakers have for decades pressured schools at all scales to offer only curricula perceived as vocationally relevant. During this same period, public higher education has become ever more dependent on corporate contracts and related philanthropy as governments have disinvested in those institutions, prompting their leaders to become increasingly willing to respond to company claims to undertake specific initiatives and curricula.

Given this long-term reality, one now must ask whether the guidance of market ideologues and firms toward instrumental and commodified knowledge has been mistargeted. That is, reading Bruni, I found myself musing how, after decades of initiatives designed to ensure that education better serve the market, one could still find officials and corporate leaders suggesting that more of the same remained necessary. This strange situation leads one to wonder whether the promoted cure is, in fact, the source of the supposed malady.

Two days before Bruni published his essay, David Brooks, also a columnist for *The New York Times*, reported that he had interviewed Bill Drayton, who coined the term “social entrepreneur,” some decades ago. Brooks recounted that Drayton had recently suggested that the nation needed a differently equipped workforce than it has been producing. More precisely,

Drayton believes we're in the middle of a necessary but painful historical transition. For millennia, most people's lives had a certain pattern. You went to school to learn a trade or a skill—baking, farming or accounting. ... The new world requires a different sort of person. Drayton calls this new sort of person a changemaker. Changemakers are people who can see the patterns around them, identify the problems in any situation, figure out ways to solve the problem, organize fluid teams, lead collective action and then continually adapt as situations change.³

Brooks then argued that for individuals to play this role, they had to possess what I have elsewhere called empathetic imagination, which Brooks, following Drayton, described as:

‘... cognitive empathy-based living for the good of all.’ Cognitive empathy is the ability to perceive how people are feeling in evolving circumstances. ‘For the good of all’ is the capacity to build teams. ... Social transformation flows from personal transformation. You change the world when you hold up a new and more attractive way to live. And Drayton wants to make universal a quality many people don't even see: agency.⁴

Two things stood out for me as I considered Brooks' and Drayton's contentions and compared those to the concern Bruni had raised. First, cognitive empathy requires deep personal consideration and reflection concerning who one is and what one believes, as well as considered regard for how and why others may live and evidence different values than your own. It demands imagination, perception and sensitivity of a sort grounded in continuing reflection on the human experience. That requirement, in turn, necessitates developing the highest order forms of communication and reasoning both to practice it and to bridge differences among those with whom one is relating. One cannot presume to serve the commons as Drayton's would-be changemaker without an awareness and an

acknowledgment of the legitimacy of one's community, and a capacity to identify its concerns and how collective action might be harnessed to address them.

More, one cannot so serve and unleash the agential possibility latent in all individuals with whom one might relate and with whom one might serve, if one fears difference or lacks the analytical wherewithal and emotional maturity born of continuing reflection on one's own and humankind's strengths and frailties. Cognitive empathy demands a deep rootedness in what joins human beings as well as a considered awareness of humankind's propensity for both good and evil, justice and injustice. It also demands the capacity to analyze knotty social problems that are likely to evidence all of those propensities and others at once, especially as those relate to self-governance challenges.

In short, if Drayton and Brooks are right, we need an educational system that encourages and elicits the empathy and cognitive imaginations of those engaged in it. Our nation needs curricula at all scales that encourage students to develop the intellectual wherewithal to address the human needs in their communities and that helps each understand the fundamental dignity that inheres in all with whom they might cooperate to realize their aims. And yet, for decades, many of our nation's public officials have preached atomistic individualism and argued that curricula should serve the market. As officials have pressed these utilitarian claims, they have convinced many of their constituents that deeper knowledge, self-awareness and analytical capabilities are dross. But, the lesson of Bruni, Brooks and Drayton is that, far from rubbish, citizen acquisition of these capabilities constitute the population's future as both a productive and democratically self-governing people.

The lesson here is that lawmakers must stop trivializing the complexity of the human experience and begin to demand afresh that educational institutions prepare Americans to participate in the market and self-governance as changemakers. Happily, it appears that these domains demand the same capabilities of the nation's individuals. The question now is whether the majority of elected officials will demonstrate sufficient imagination and courage to press for their adoption as a foremost social and educational aspiration for all. Should they do so, it appears the "market" will embrace their effort. So, the issue now is whether they can overcome their own emotional fears and intellectual smallness to acknowledge this

necessity, having worked for decades to delegitimize its centrality in the nation's consciousness.

(Originally published February 18, 2018)

Notes

¹ Bruni, Frank. 2018. "Corporations will Inherit the Earth," *The New York Times*, February 10. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/10/opinion/sunday/corporations-will-inherit-the-earth.html>.

² Bruni, "Corporations will Inherit the Earth."

³ Brooks, David. 2018. "Everyone a Changemaker," *The New York Times*, February 8. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/08/opinion/changemaker-social-entrepreneur.html>.

⁴ Brooks, "Everyone a Changemaker."

117 Mobilizing Rhetoric as Emblem of Enervating Democratic Capacity

In my “On ‘Changemakers,’ Education and Democratic Self-Governance” *Soundings* commentary, I argued the following:

Cognitive empathy requires deep personal consideration and reflection concerning who one is and what one believes, as well as considered regard for how and why others may live and evidence different values than your own. It demands imagination, perception and sensitivity of a sort grounded in continuing reflection on the human experience. That requirement, in turn, necessitates developing the highest order forms of communication and reasoning both to practice it and to bridge differences among those with whom one is relating. ...

More, one cannot so serve and unleash the agential possibility latent in all individuals with whom one might relate and with whom one might serve, if one fears difference or lacks the analytical wherewithal and emotional maturity born of continuing reflection on one’s own and humankind’s strengths and frailties. Cognitive empathy demands a deep rootedness in what joins human beings as well as a considered awareness of humankind’s propensity for both good and evil, justice and injustice. It also demands the capacity to analyze knotty social problems that are likely to evidence all of those propensities and others at once, especially as those relate to self-governance challenges.¹

These contentions and four other themes I have highlighted in recent essays—the role of fear, “othering,” absolutism and anti-communitarianism in today’s mobilization politics—came to mind as I read President Donald Trump’s remarks at the February 23 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) near Washington, D.C. Each of these concerns alone, and certainly all of them taken together, serve only to weaken and undermine democratic proclivities among those who accept them. In so doing and in the longer pull, they also work to diminish our nation’s capacity for self-governance.

Trump employed all of these negative tropes in his CPAC remarks. Consider, for example, his use of the fable of the woman and the ungrateful serpent as a metaphor for how immigrants and refugees who come to the United States treat citizens of this country. Here is Trump's version of the tale and the conclusions he drew from it in his speech:

On her way to work one morning, down the path along the lake, a tenderhearted woman saw a poor, half-hearted, frozen snake. His pretty colored skin had been all frosted with the dew. 'Poor thing,' she cried, 'I'll take you in, and I'll take care of you.'

'Take me in, oh, tender woman. Take me in, for Heaven's sake. Take me in, oh, tender woman,' sighed the vicious snake.

She wrapped him up all cozy in a comforter of silk, and laid him by her fireside with some honey and some milk. She hurried home from work that night, and as soon as she arrived, she found that pretty snake she'd taken in had been revived. ...

She stroked his pretty skin again, and kissed and held him tight. But instead of saying thank you, that snake gave her a vicious bite. ...

'I saved you,' cried the woman. 'And you've bitten me. Heaven's why? You know your bite is poisonous, and now I'm going to die.'

'Oh, shut up, silly woman,' said the reptile with a grin. 'You knew damn well I was a snake before you took me in.' (Applause.)

And that's what we're doing with our country, folks. We're letting people in, and it's going to be a lot of trouble. It's only getting worse. But we're giving you protection like never before. Our law enforcement is doing a better job than we've ever done before. ... (Applause.)²

This rhetoric is sweeping, absolute, factually inaccurate and designed to elicit fear. Trump used the story to ask his audience to hate a group of people on the basis of deceitfully ascribed characteristics, and he went still further to contend that those listening to him should loathe such individuals on the basis of fear. More subtly, this sort of speech attacks the idea of community by singling out specific groups for opprobrium and arguing that one cannot

trust those “others.” I need not belabor here the irony that Trump’s mother, grandfather and two of his three wives were immigrants to this nation.

It also seems clear that Trump’s absolutism and false claims of certainty give members of his audience who wish to believe his assertions a way to make sense of the swiftly changing economic and social realities the United States now confronts, and to become comfortable with blaming specific groups for them. In this sense, Trump’s speech was profoundly anti-democratic. That is, his comments undermined claims of common humanity by degrading and dehumanizing targeted individuals and groups. One cannot “be like us,” Trump told his audience through his use of the fable, and yet “kill” us for our empathy. This sort of rhetoric encourages reckless and wanton cruelty on the basis of imagined and fantastical slights, even as it explicitly characterizes empathy as the province of suckers.

Trump’s CPAC rhetoric concerning the Parkland, Florida school shootings, in which a deranged individual used an assault-style rifle to murder 17 students and staff members, was similar in character. The President called for arming teachers with concealed weapons and “hardening” schools as a potential solution to the periodic mass killings happening in the nation’s educational institutions (a phenomenon unique to the United States):

It’s time to make our schools a much harder target for attackers. ... When we declare our schools to be gun-free zones, it just puts our students in far more danger. (Applause.) ...

And this would be a major deterrent because these people are inherently cowards. If they thought—like, if this guy thought that other people would be shooting bullets back at him, he wouldn’t have gone to that school.³

As Trump defined it, the “problem” of frequent mass shootings in the United States is not that individuals, including teenagers, can easily acquire assault-style rifles and other powerful guns, but that teachers are unarmed when individuals attack them with such weapons. Trump did not mention the role of the police, who represent and work to protect communities, nor did he suggest that government more generally had a role to play in preventing the possibility of such violence, except to permit teachers to carry concealed weapons. Trump also did not treat the role of law in creating the nation’s mass murder culture. State and federal lawmakers, after all, have

crafted the statutes that have allowed mentally ill individuals and criminals such easy access to guns in this country.

Instead, he framed the issue as one of fearing the murderous among us and individually protecting ourselves from them. The implicit vision of society Trump presented was of a mythical Wild West run amok. This binary simplification undermines awareness of the need for cognitive empathy concerning how to balance the role of citizen rights to own weapons and society's right to reside in peace. The latter requires a conception of community not present in Trump's vision, which addresses the concern only from the standpoint of individuals. Trump's formulation was devoid of any intimation that Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Parkland, the state of Florida or the nation shape and are shaped by their inhabitants. Trump's remarks lacked any sense those communities have rightful and profoundly significant roles to play in their participants' lives.

Trump also called for efforts to "target harden" schools in order to prevent preying criminal elements from entering them or killing or maiming others once within. That is, far from calling for schools to be gun-free zones, Trump suggested they become heavily armed, securitized, weapons laden and fear-filled locations. It seems more than counter intuitive to imagine that such action would constitute a "safer" environment for school-age children.

Trump's speech evoked a well-established pattern of mobilizing voters on the basis of fear, as individuals alone, in the name of phantom absolutist problems and responses and against stereotyped and "othered" persons and groups. As long as Trump, and other GOP leaders particularly, can galvanize voters on the basis of these profoundly anti-democratic means, we may expect citizen capacity for cognitive empathy and community-based action to continue to decline. To the extent such occurs, we may also expect the nation's capacity for self-governance and its companion capability to maintain its citizens' human and civil rights to deteriorate.

(Originally published March 5, 2018)

Notes

¹ Stephenson, Max, Jr. 2018. "On 'Changemakers,' Education and Democratic Self-Governance," *Soundings*, February 19. Available at: <http://soundings.spia.vt.edu/>.

² Lord, Debbie. 2018. "Full Transcript: Read Donald Trump's Remarks at CPAC," *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 24. Available at: <https://www.myajc.com/news/national/full-transcript-read-donald->

[trump-remarks-cpac/Ctg8xJ8h2GNLiXSVHBqKMP/](https://www.cpac.org/trump-remarks-cpac/Ctg8xJ8h2GNLiXSVHBqKMP/).

³ Lord. “Full Transcript.”

118 Of Democratic Greatness and Infamy

Gary Oldman recently received an Oscar at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences annual awards ceremony for his 2017 portrayal of Winston Churchill in *Darkest Hour*.¹ The film depicts Churchill as he began his tenure as the United Kingdom's Prime Minister in 1940 and focused partly on his political battles with those seeking to avoid conflict at virtually any price. But, perhaps principally, the film shined a spotlight on his determination, humanity and greatness. While much else might be said of the movie, it surely captured a democratic leader and state at a moment of gathering resolve in the face of the menace and might of human darkness and tyranny as embodied by the Third Reich.

While viewing the film, I found myself considering its implications for today's American political situation in which a demagogic Donald Trump, awash in allegations of personal corruption and purveying vague, hate and lie-filled rhetoric at every turn, nonetheless has maintained the support of the bulk of his political party and millions of Americans. These individuals have accepted and rationalized his assaults on personal and civic virtue and democratic norms as "fake news" or the product of supposed partisan enemies who should be "locked-up" for false fantastical misdeeds. Given this continuing domestic reality, it is interesting to compare Trump's stances and actions to those of Churchill, as the English leader embarked on his role as a signally important world figure in the battle to overcome the Nazi threat to civilization. As many historians have argued, and as the *Darkest Hour* memorably recounts, while hardly flawless, Churchill rightly has a secure place in the pantheon of great leaders and defenders of the power and possibility of human freedom.

To gain his footing and lead his nation in its time of peril, Churchill had first to confront many members of his party who sought to avoid conflict, including the dying and disgraced Neville Chamberlain, still the chair of the new prime minister's party. Chamberlain and others in Churchill's War Cabinet and coalition were prepared to do whatever was necessary to undercut Churchill, whom they feared might mobilize Great Britain to seek to defend its borders, rather than negotiate terms with Germany. Their stance required that Churchill not only find ways and means to fight the

tyranny at his nation's doorstep, but also simultaneously address successfully those willing to rationalize that Adolf Hitler, the megalomaniac who had created that situation, could now readily be appeased.

By comparison, in Trump, the United States has a President and political party (the GOP) prepared not only to accept documented Russian efforts to disrupt the 2016 national American election, but also to celebrate their architect, the autocratic tyrant Vladimir Putin, as a model leader. Trump has likewise lionized skinheads and racists and engaged in coy anti-Semitic rhetoric to mobilize those sharing such nativistic and racist views to his banner. In these polarizing stands he has behaved very unlike Churchill who sought to unite a disparate people to defend their nation with little to promise them except, "blood, toil, tears, and sweat,"² as he stated in his maiden speech as Prime Minister to Parliament on May 13, 1940. In contrast to this tough-minded call to principled moral courage, Trump has behaved as a spoiled child and unreservedly criticized all who might question him. More, as many other past demagogues in history, Trump has promised his supporters he will ensure them employment by vilifying immigrants and refugees. He has also assured his followers that withdrawing from international agreements designed to protect them from environmental degradation, or to provide stable global commerce and secure against corruption, will provide solace for their fears of continuing economic and social change. All of these claims are lies, and each has appealed to the worst in the natures of the audiences Trump has targeted.

Churchill worked to mobilize the citizens of the United Kingdom to counter tyranny and he did so by telling them truthfully that their choices and the days before them would be deeply difficult. In contrast, Trump has lied to his supporters repeatedly and promised that solipsism and cruel avarice are all that can or should matter in their lives. Churchill rallied his nation on the basis of the values and principles their imperfect nation nonetheless stood for: freedom of speech and of the press and the rule of law. In an almost unspeakable paradox, very unlike those Churchill sought to rally his nation around shared purpose and comity to confront, Trump has routinely called on humans' capacity for hatred, cruelty, avarice and smallness. He has argued that Americans expressing their views in protests should be imprisoned, has constantly attacked the press as purveyors of "fake news" when those institutions point out his lies and persistent mockery of democratic values. He has dubbed himself "above the law" and has terrorized his Attorney General for not ensuring that he and his campaign

operatives were protected from investigation for apparent corruption and wrongdoing.

As far as rhetoric is concerned, Churchill spoke with ringing clarity and unparalleled grace of the dangers to freedom posed by the Axis powers, and of the value of democratic governance they threatened. Here is an excerpt from his speech of June 18, 1940 as England stood alone in Europe against the coming onslaught of the Wehrmacht:

What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. ... Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. ... Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'³

The United States does not have a tyrant's armies at its doorstep, but it nonetheless confronts a menace of its own making. The country is today endangered by the choice of a share of its citizens to support its president as he lurches from one hate-inflected speech and stance to another and persists in daily rhetorical barrages that undercut the nation's most vital principles and norms. Economist and commentator Paul Krugman has lately christened Trump's approach to the world as one of "belligerent ignorance," an apt descriptor of his continuing uninformed bellicosity, which rests foremost in a willingness to despise, to belittle and to other those who dare disagree with him.⁴ The Republican Party has aligned around its titular demagogic leader and the nation now confronts a possible usurpation of its most precious values by a share of its own leaders and citizens. This is an onslaught predicated ultimately on fear, hatred and ignorance, a powerful multipronged weapon aimed squarely at freedom and hope for self-governance. No Wehrmacht imminently threatens the shores or skies of the United States. Instead, and very like another threat to England that Churchill confronted in 1940, many U.S. leaders are now willing to rationalize evil in their pursuit of power, ideology or spoils. The danger for freedom and self-governance is obvious and palpable. It remains to be seen whether an American leader as determined as Churchill proved will emerge to lead their fellow citizens to confront that peril.

(Originally published March 19, 2018)

Notes

¹ Bevan, Tim; Bruce, Lisa; Fellner, Eric; McCarten, Anthony; Urbanski, Douglas (Producers). Wright, Joe (Director). 2018. *The Darkest Hour* [motion picture]. UK: Perfect World Pictures; Working Title Films. Available at: <http://focusfeatures.com/darkesthour>.

² Churchill, Winston. 1940. "Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat Speech," *ThoughtCo.com.*, May 13. Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/blood-toil-tears-and-sweat-winston-churchill-1779309>.

³ Churchill, Winston. 1940. "Their Finest Hour," *International Churchill Society*, June 18. Available at: <https://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/their-finest-hour/>.

⁴ Krugman, Paul. 2018. "Oh, What a Trumpy Trade War!" *The New York Times*, March 8. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/opinion/trump-trade-tariffs-steel.html>.

119 Revisiting the Foundations of Democratic Self-Governance

Virginia Tech (VT) President Tim Sands shared a thoughtful letter with the faculty, staff and students of the institution he leads on March 30, 2018. His comments concerned an incident earlier in that week involving racial bias and discrimination among members of one of the University's athletic teams. For my purposes here, the specifics of the scenario are less significant than Sands' response to it and what the matter says more generally about the state of American society and politics today:

While we discuss and debate the intent, the context, and the remorse expressed by the students involved, we would be missing an opportunity if we did not accept the reality that this incident is not an isolated one at Virginia Tech, in our communities, or in our country. ...

We cannot practice *Ut Prosim* ["That I May Serve"] without empathy, and we cannot develop empathy without curiosity and a commitment to learning more about the lived experience of others every day.¹

Coincidentally, just two days before, Paul Krugman, writing in *The New York Times*, highlighted President Donald Trump's pattern of appointments and daily role in assaulting long-honored values and norms in our nation's politics. He noted that Trump had recently nominated his personal physician, Ronny L. Jackson, to head the Department of Veteran's Affairs, knowing well that his choice possessed no managerial experience of any sort. He suggested that the President:

... is acting as if his job were to run up ratings for his TV show, not to make actual policies. ... Yet America still needs to be governed, and Trump's lack of seriousness has consequences. ... Another consequence is that if and when America needs real leadership, there will be nobody home.

So far, the Trump era has been almost free from crises Trump didn't generate himself. One of the few such events demanding an effective

response was Hurricane Maria—and the response was disastrously inadequate.²

These examples each reflect two broader tendencies in American society. Trump has brought these together and represents their apotheosis to date as he has sought to exploit them for political mobilization and power. The first example, evidenced in the Virginia Tech incident, relates to this nation's long-festering difficulty in ensuring equal rights under the law and in practice for Native Americans, women and for the vulnerable in its midst, including, among others, non-white citizens and residents, individuals with disabilities of all sorts, including those with mental illness, and finally, those whose lone social "offense" is comparative poverty. Assuring human and civil rights and freedom for these individuals requires that society treat them with dignity and respect. Yet, contrary to this imperative, Trump has exploited the relative ignorance, innate potential for cruelty and the fears of a share of the population and used their willingness to other and discriminate against those different than themselves as his primary political mobilization strategy. Thus, he sought to discredit and humiliate his opponent in the 2016 election because she was female, has routinely lied about immigrants and refugees as threats to the nation, has falsely demeaned African Americans and Hispanics repeatedly, and has even gone so far as publicly to debase athletes of color who have dared disagree with his demagoguery. This behavior has broken all long-standing norms of presidential and civil behavior even as it has implicated the President personally and repeatedly in lying to the general public concerning those he has maligned. It has found him continually fanning the flames of racial and other discriminatory behaviors among Americans willing to listen to such lies. Perhaps the most obvious example of this stance on Trump's part occurred last summer when he suggested that neo-Nazi sympathizers and white supremacists were the moral and ethical equivalent of those protesting their behavior in Charlottesville, Virginia.

When called to account for his dismissive attitude toward human and civil rights and for his mendacity, Trump has suggested that those who question his claims are criticizing him for partisan purposes and offering "Fake News." The more egregious his paeans to racist or discriminatory behavior or his lies, the more quickly and loudly he has denounced those who might tell the public the truth, even when those individuals expressing concern are officials in his own administration or elected Congressional leaders of his

own party. Trump cannot be held individually responsible for the VT episode, or for the uptick in hate crimes and incidents of discrimination in the United States during his presidency. Nor is he personally accountable for the fact that many have chosen to believe his nonsense concerning minorities and refugees and immigrants, but he has surely made it easier for those peddling the hate and lies that underlie these examples to believe that it is reasonable so to behave, since the President daily advances such rhetoric and assertions. More, he has refused to repudiate those practicing still worse behaviors, and instead has daily encouraged just such comportment in his efforts to mobilize citizens on the basis of ignorance, fear and willingness to other and hate.

Even as he has peddled animus, Trump has also appealed to voters with superficial and empty binaries and promises. For Trump, immigrants are rapists and criminals and the nation's cities are aflame and experiencing high levels of crime, even though these arguments are simply fantasies. Likewise, in Trump's version of reality, trade agreements are pernicious lies costing Americans' jobs and the Russian dictator Vladimir Putin is the essence of courageous leadership. Every one of these claims is outrageous and misleads and simplifies reality, even as it offers superficial binaries and scapegoats for complex social challenges. Trump was once the attraction on a reality show that featured him following carefully orchestrated scripts to "fire" individuals who fell short of his supposed entrepreneurial standards. As Krugman suggested, Trump has behaved in office as if he were still appearing weekly on that television series by appealing to voters' basic desire for easy explanations of complex phenomena. But, as Krugman also observed, Trump's failure to address reality with his falsely constructed Cosmos misleads citizens, even as it daily creates a new array of social problems of its own.

To the extent that Trump is able to persuade Americans of his cartoonish and contorted vision, he encourages them to hate and to simplify reality in ways that lead to superficial and distorted policies and to adopt behaviors that undermine the possibility for democratic deliberation. President Sands argued rightly that the appropriate response to the VT incident is increased probity, empathy and respect for other individuals, irrespective of their characteristics. In contrast, Trump's mobilization strategy prompts those who believe his caricatures to adopt his anti-intellectual stance and his contempt for compassion. Nevertheless, both prudent consideration and understanding are essential for democratic possibility in a diverse

democratic society. As Sands also remarked, both of these requisites of self-governance depend on individuals reflexively grasping their significance and practicing them daily: “Let us use this moment to confront our own biases, cultural misperceptions, fears, and aggressions.”³ In the name of power and his personal narcissism, Trump daily attacks the fundamentals of self-governance in American society. Sands’ warning and call to practice empathy and to learn more about those with whom we live could not be more timely for the University community he leads and for the broader society of which it is a part.

(Originally published April 8, 2018)

Notes

¹ Sands, Timothy. 2018 “A Statement from President Tim Sands,” *Virginia Tech*, March 30. Available at: <https://vtnews.vt.edu/articles/2018/03/president-statement-033018.html>.

² Krugman, Paul. 2018. “Is it Policy, or Just Reality TV?” *The New York Times*, March 29. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/29/opinion/ronny-jackson-trade-trump.html>.

³ Sands, “A Statement from President Tim Sands.”

120 “Seeking What No Other Man has Found or can Find”

I had coffee recently with an old friend and our discussion soon turned to the dangers now facing our Republic and other democracies around the world. As we shared our concerns, we both observed that while surely profound, those challenges were hardly new. Nor, were they unpredictable. Rather, they ultimately had their roots in human behavior and complexity. As melancholy a notion as it may be, human beings have always been predatory and unfathomably cruel, even as they have always simultaneously been capable of the most sublime beauty and kindness. Leaders likewise across human history have practiced and appealed to these different elements of human possibility to curry favor and acquire and maintain power in regimes of virtually every description. Some—tyrants and demagogues—have appealed to the worst in human kind. Others have sought to appeal to humanity’s highest possibilities and to realize what those could bring for social justice and freedom.

Later that day, I began reading a volume that quoted Henry David Thoreau’s comments on the “Chatham Men,” denizens of that harbor community on Cape Cod. These were mariners who had made it their life’s work to profit from those who had perished at sea in the powerful storms off the Cape by dragging for the anchors those unfortunate seafarers had lost. As he watched one such sloop and crew working from the shore, Thoreau observed:

She had her boats out at the work while she shuffled about on various tacks, and when, anything was found, drew up to hoist it onboard, It is a singular employment, at which men are regularly hired and paid for their industry, to hunt to-day in pleasant weather for anchors which have been lost, -the sunken faith and hope of mariners, to which they trusted in vain.¹

As he reflected on all he saw unfolding that day, Thoreau rejected such efforts both as physically manifest and as a metaphor for how to lead one’s life or proceed in one’s profession:

But that is not treasure for us which another man has lost; rather it is for us to seek what no other man has found or can find, not be Chatham men, dragging for anchors.²

By analogy, Americans today confront just the choice to which Thoreau pointed. They can descend to the most base and cruel elements in their natures and seek to profit from the pain and suffering of others. Indeed, they may cause such conditions for others by depriving them of their dignity, rights and standing. Yet, as Thoreau well knew, history suggests that the costs of taking such actions to assuage fears and feed personal power cravings can be unfathomable. The 20th century alone saw the Holocaust and Stalin's systematic extermination of millions in Russia during his rule, among many other examples. Try as one may, it is difficult not to view citizens in the United States who would support torture and the deprivation of others' rights on the basis of their skin color, immigration status or other characteristic, for example, as descending to the malignancy that inheres in their natures.

Profound difficulties for self-governance and human and civil rights arise when elected and would-be leaders curry such inclinations and citizens respond in undisciplined ways, usually borne of the omnipresent triad of fear, hatred and ignorance. In Thoreau's terms, these represent modern examples of what others have lost and not of what might be imagined or sought. Not surprisingly, these stands have routinely been embraced by demagogues around the world, including our current President. That fact should surprise no one.

Indeed, leadership as the equivalent of dragging for anchors finds those practicing it appealing to the worst in their constituents and preying on those instincts to secure support and a crude legitimacy. The costs of such actions are well known and surpassingly sad as they routinely result in death, deprivation of freedoms and socially approved ostracization and calumny. The results are likewise predictably anti-democratic and dehumanizing for those so attacked. There are alternative ways by which to exercise public leadership and American history has offered many individuals offering those, including George Washington, James Madison, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Theodore Roosevelt, Barack Obama, Lucy Stone, Eleanor Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt and countless others.

This spring our nation commemorates the 50th anniversary of the assassinations of two of its most gifted modern leaders, Robert F. Kennedy

and Martin Luther King, Jr. These were individuals who looked ahead to “find what no other man has found or could find” in Thoreau’s terms, and who appealed to the better “angels” in the natures of Americans. Each eschewed hatred and violence and both offered compelling visions of a democratic society characterized by mutual empathy and a shared quest for the realization of social justice.

I quoted Kennedy’s legendary speech in Indianapolis, Indiana on learning of King’s death in April 1968 in the January 22, 2018, *Soundings*. He warned presciently in his remarks on that terrible night of potential social division and violence and called instead for comity and justice:

We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization—black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another. ...

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another; and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.³

In what many scholars regard as his most powerful and profound speech on democratic governance, given at the University of Cape Town in South Africa on June 6, 1966, Kennedy declared:

And most important of all, all of the panoply of government power has been committed to the goal of equality before the law, as we are now committing ourselves to the achievement of equal opportunity in fact. We must recognize the full human equality of all of our people before God, before the law, and in the councils of government. ... We must do it for the single and fundamental reason that it is the right thing to do.⁴

Kennedy looked forward and asked his audience and Americans to reach out to one another to find their shared destiny amidst their heterogeneity. He appealed to the highest in his listeners’ natures. King similarly appealed to the best in those he sought to lead by routinely asking them to practice

nonviolence and to work for equality and justice for all. On accepting the Nobel Prize for Peace on December 10, 1964, King observed:

I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind. I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the “isness” of man’s present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal “oughtness” that forever confronts him ...

.... I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down other-centered men can build up.⁵

These two leaders saw the virtues in Americans and sought to realize a vision of a society characterized by hope and equal rights. They worked to create a future that ensured the rights of all, even as both were deeply aware of how difficult that challenge would be to attain. They asked more of the nation’s citizens than a descent into cruelty, hatred and bigotry, the touchstone of our President today, and believed just as deeply that the citizenry could respond. The lessons that King and Kennedy taught are apparently simple, but their plainness hid grace and a complex and boundless passion in pursuit of justice for all. Americans now confront a choice concerning the people and nation they wish to be. King and Kennedy called for freedom and equality, despite the Sisyphean character of efforts to achieve those goals in the face of the passions and smallness of all human beings. One may hope citizens will realize how vital that possibility remains and how deeply it merits pursuit, and then will choose wisely in the coming electoral cycle.

(Originally published April 22, 2018)

Notes

¹ Thoreau, Henry David. 1865, 1951. *Cape Cod* (arranged with notes by D.C. Lunt). New Haven: College and University Press, pp.160-161.

² Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, pp. 160-161.

³ Kennedy, Robert F. 1968. “Remarks on the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” April 4, American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches. Available at:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkonmlkdeath.html>.

⁴ Kennedy, Robert F. 1966. "Day of Affirmation Address at Cape Town University," June 6, American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches. Available at: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkcapetown.htm>.

⁵ King, Martin Luther Jr. 1964. "The Nobel Peace Prize 1964 Acceptance Speech," December 10, Nobel Prize (website). Available at: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-acceptance_en.html.

121 The Fearsome Power of Hate

I have been reflecting on the apparently limitless human propensity for hatred and cruelty, especially as so many illustrations have been under discussion in recent days. I want to share two examples that have been reported on news sites, and then discuss one that happened decades ago, but resonates in today's political and social climate. Donald Trump was the architect of two of these, but they all remind, or should remind, friends of freedom of the dangers for self-governance and liberty of encouraging or celebrating hate.

Charles Blow offered the first instance in his June 7, 2018, *New York Times* column.¹ He reminded readers of Donald Trump's decision almost 30 years ago to purchase a full-page advertisement in *The Times* following the rape and vicious attack on the "Central Park Jogger" in April 1989. That ad embraced hatred and cruelty and called for the swift deaths of the five teenagers who were, it turned out, wrongly accused of that heinous crime. Trump has never acknowledged his perpetration of this outrage or apologized for his wildly erroneous accusations. Indeed, when the young men were exonerated by incontrovertible DNA evidence and a confession by the actual offender some 13 years following their wrongful convictions and imprisonment, and the City of New York paid a settlement for its manifest injustice several years thereafter, Trump wrote an opinion piece for the *New York Daily News* suggesting that the City's action was a "disgrace."² He contended that the teens' incarceration was somehow justifiable because "These men do not exactly have the pasts of angels."³ This statement was worse than shameful. No one should be incarcerated for a crime they did not commit, nor tried and convicted without due process of law. Trump refused to acknowledge the injustice he not only had supported, but for which he had actively proselytized, and sought instead to suggest these young men had been deservedly imprisoned on the vague grounds that they were "imperfect."

Indeed, Trump went still further to contend in his original advertisement following the crime that then New York Mayor Ed Koch was wrong, in the frenzied atmosphere following the attack, to call for the dignification of all individuals and for bending every effort to ensure reasoned application of relevant law, irrespective of the allegations in play:

Mayor Koch has stated that hate and rancor should be removed from our hearts. I do not think so. I want to hate these muggers and murderers. They should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, they should be executed for their crimes. ... Yes, Mayor Koch, I want to hate these murderers and I always will. I am not looking to psychoanalyze or understand them, I am looking to punish them.⁴

A second vignette arises from President Trump's persistent habit of referring inexactly to immigrants by characterizing a small and vicious El Salvadoran gang of illegal migrants, MS-13, as "animals."⁵ The difficulty, of course, is that whatever the President's precise wording may be, his supporters hear him arguing that "all immigrants are animals." Beyond this thorny concern, it must be recalled that whatever their lawlessness, MS-13's members are human beings and not animals, and that the vast share of immigrants (legal or not) do not commit crimes of any kind. In fact, the crime rate among immigrants is distinctly lower than that among native-born Americans. In short, this sort of rhetoric from Trump, most recently advanced in a rant in mid-May, is, at best, grotesquely misleading on all of these counts. At worst, it can encourage a broad-gauged hatred and loathing among many people against a largely innocent population. Indeed, the danger of this sort of vague over-heated rhetoric, as *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne has noted, is both obvious and a repeated lesson of history:

No one wants to be put in a position of seeming to say anything good about gang members. Yet Trump's strategy of dehumanization must be resisted across the board. We cannot shy away from what history teaches. Pronouncing whole categories of people as subhuman numbs a nation's moral sense and, in extreme but, unfortunately, too many cases, becomes a rationale for collective cruelty.⁶

I encountered the third example of the implications of this penchant to dehumanize groups within a population or citizenry in Etty Hillesum's journal and diaries. Hillesum was a Dutch Jewish intellectual from a middle-class family who volunteered to work at Westerbork, the Nazi "transit" camp in Amsterdam, when her brother and parents were imprisoned there. Ultimately, she joined her family as one of more than a thousand individuals sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau from Westerbork on September 7, 1943, where she died, at 29, on November 30 of that year. Her account of the Camp

commandant “inspecting” the weekly freight train to the concentration camp on August 24, 1943, just two weeks prior to her own forced departure, is searing for its evocation of the contemptuous cruelty and hatred that underpinned this evil. Each train jammed roughly 1,000 people (men, women, children, babies, sick, healthy and the dying alike) into empty cars with their rucksacks, paper mats for the infirm and a single pot for hygiene:

On this cruel morning his face is almost iron-gray. ... And there is something else about him, halfway between a dapper hairdresser’s assistant and a stage door Johnny. But the grimness and the rigidly forced bearing predominate. ... He is inspecting his troops: the sick, infants in arms, young mothers and shaven-headed men. A few more ailing people are being brought up on stretchers. He makes an impatient gesture; they’re taking too long about it.⁷

The commandant was irritated and wished to send this train of misery on its way to Auschwitz-Birkenau where nearly all within it would be systematically murdered, many within minutes of their arrival. These were not humans in his view, but as Hitler often dehumanizingly argued concerning those he demonized, vermin. The horrific cruelty of Westerbork, let alone the concentration camps established by the Nazis is almost unfathomable, but none of it could have occurred or been sustained without the hatred and accompanying willingness to treat fellow human beings with immeasurable disdain, fueled by a vast effort to scapegoat and debase those it targeted.⁸ Hitler likewise singled-out “communists” and those with disabilities, among others, for similar propagandistic hatemongering.

The lessons, for those wishing to protect and preserve freedom and self-governance, of these three accounts of the embrace of hatred are straightforward but crucial. First, human beings are capable of the most heinous of crimes when given leave to commit them, typically via concerted efforts to dehumanize those attacked. American history alone offers the examples of the nationally sanctioned genocide against Native Americans, the long-term enslavement and invidious treatment of African Americans and the internment during World War II of Japanese Americans. To these deep and almost unimaginable injustices, one might add the systematic mistreatment of women and many immigrant groups at various points in U.S. history. More generally, history teaches that democracy cannot check human cruelty and hatred once these have been released in a citizenry,

usually in the name of fear. Paradoxically, only that population can discipline its own excesses.

Second, while it may seem obvious, it should be remarked that democratic leaders who mobilize via hatred and demand cruelty against specific groups are, by definition, engaging in anti-democratic behavior. We know from not only the extreme example of the Holocaust, but also from more recent “democratic” genocidal rampages against innocent people in Myanmar, the Balkans, Indonesia and Cambodia, that such rhetoric can unbridle horrors beyond comprehension and surely, often beyond the ken or control of those who encouraged them. Any democratic leader seeking to mobilize via hate runs the very high risk of “succeeding” too well in that Faustian bargain.

Finally, unlike any American president in modern history, Trump has systematically and publicly sought to demean, degrade and diminish specific groups within American society, including African Americans, the poor and immigrants, in order to mobilize and placate the fear and anger of what he sees as a specific group of supportive voters. In so doing, he is *de facto* testing the civic strength and resilience of the American citizenry writ large and of governmental institutions and democratic values aimed at ensuring the rule of law and the civil and human rights of all. Suffice it to say, history has shown repeatedly in our own and in other nations that none of these may simply be assumed to be secure in the face of a determined majority willing to follow the lead of an individual who successfully plays on that population’s fears and capacity for hatred and rationalization. Nevertheless, many Americans are indeed pushing back, and many are outraged at the assault on democratic values now afoot in the name of power and self-aggrandizement. The outcome of the current struggle over the very foundations of our nation’s governance, in the face of Trump’s relentless demagoguery, remains, as Dionne has pointed out, very much an open question. A democratic and free society stands for nothing if it does not strive first and foremost to guarantee all of its residents their innate rights as human beings.

(Originally published June 17, 2018)

Notes

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³ Trump, “Central Park Five.”

⁴ Mathis-Lilley, Ben. 2016. “Remember when Trump wanted to Execute Five Innocent Teenagers? He Still Says He Got it Right,” *Slate*, October 7. Available at: http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2016/10/07/donald_trump_says_central_park_5_are_still_guilty.html.

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⁷ Hillesum, Etty. 1996. *An Interrupted Life: Letters from Westerbork*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, p.352.

⁸ Westerbork’s prisoners were sent disproportionately to Sobibor and, when that camp was destroyed following an attempted insurrection, to Auschwitz-Birkenau, for annihilation.

122 An ‘Infestation’ of Lies*

While Donald Trump is now well known for persistently lying to the American people about matters large and small, I was nonetheless surprised to read that he had sought to defend his ruinous and cruel immigration and border policy by declaring that the Democratic Party had at once created his approach and was preventing its realization.¹ These claims were fabrications. And, tellingly, in his many statements during a week in which his administration’s treatment of migrant children was the target of outrage around the world, he said nothing substantive about his policy of separating infants and youngsters from their families at the border and retaining them in makeshift cage-like environments. Instead, he compounded his bald-faced untruth concerning the provenance of his policy with several more wild lies during an appearance at the Nevada state GOP convention. As *The Independent* has reported:

Having changed gears since signing the executive order over ending separations on Wednesday, Mr. Trump is now using the type of hardline language that was central to his election campaign.

‘We will have millions and millions of people pouring through our country with all of the problems that would cause. ... If they see any weakness, they will come by the millions.’ He compared the two main parties’ immigration stances and called Democrats “weak” on border issues.

‘Our issue is: strong borders, no crime. Their issue is: open borders, let MS-13 [gang] all over our country.’²

Each of these statements was a complete falsehood. Trump and the GOP developed this nation’s current “zero tolerance” policies concerning the border and immigration, including the choice to separate children from their parents, in a clear violation of American values, international human rights principles and common decency. Any reasoned analysis would not confuse human rights violations with “strength,” as Trump did in his speech, and as he routinely does, contending that others are “weak” for not embracing wanton cruelty. Trump’s contention that “millions” will cross into the United States if this nation pursues a humane immigration policy likewise has no basis

in fact. Nor, as Trump suggested, do the Democrats support the criminal gang MS-13 or any other such entity. More, as a factual proposition, MS-13 represents only a tiny and profoundly unrepresentative fraction of the immigrant population. Additionally, as a matter of politics, it is the Republicans who are fractured on the immigration issue and Trump has contributed to his Party's internal chaos by calling on House GOP members not to vote for an immigration bill before the November 2018 mid-term election, in the face of Republican congressional leaders' attempts to do otherwise.

As exemplified by his recent statements concerning immigration, Trump's lies are by now so commonplace and so often preposterous that it is wearisome to track them all. One is tempted thereby not to call him out when he denies reality or insists that his own fantasies, imagined conspiracies and unreality be adopted as accepted public narrative. But friends of freedom and self-governance cannot permit such a turn to occur among a majority, as such would ultimately signal the end of both liberty and democracy in our nation. As the political theorist Hannah Arendt wrote in her examination of Nazi propagandizing in her native land:

In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true. ... The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.³

Trump is apparently well along in convincing millions of Americans that his version of events, no matter how false and self-serving, should always be believed against reality and the facts. In so far as immigration is concerned, this story is one of fear, imminent danger and "othering" and is completely antithetical to the truth and to our nation's history. *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen has captured the tropes Trump employs and

many of the possible reasons why his invented immigration claims, and others, play so well with a majority share of Republican partisan identifiers and roughly 40 percent of the U.S. electorate:

Every utterance of Trump on immigration is meant to conflate immigration with danger. ... The immigrant brings violence. The immigrant brings terror. The immigrant's humanity is lesser or nonexistent. These are tropes about 'the other' [and] ... Trump does not hesitate to use them. ... One may debate the reasons for the phenomenon: the destabilizing impact of globalization on Western democracies; stagnant middle-income wages; growing inequality; fear of an automated future; the sheer scale of current migration, with some 68.5 million refugees or internally displaced people in the world; the failure of the United States or Europe to enact coherent immigration policies; the sense of vulnerability that jihadist terrorism since 2001 has propagated; the resultant spread of phobia about Islam; the ease of mob mobilization through fear-mongering and scapegoating on social media.⁴

All of these factors merit careful analysis, as do Trump's overt appeals to xenophobia and racism, which are enabled and spread by social media, conservative talk radio and Fox television propagandizing. His service to the ideological agenda of some groups (evangelicals in particular) and of key financial supporters of the GOP deserve investigation as well, especially his efforts to allow environmental degradation to reduce costs for certain firms and his willingness to sacrifice the interests of major portions of the overall citizenry (particularly the poor and vulnerable groups) and economy to the aims of a few individuals, as can be seen in his protectionist trade, budgetary and tax stances, for example. Finally, Trump has made a show of supporting the most brutal of dictators, including Duterte in the Philippines, Jong-un in North Korea and Putin in Russia, while picking fights with the leaders of closely allied democratic nations—Canada, Germany and France. The facts undergirding these stands and their implications also deserve study.

In sum, whatever weight one assigns these elements in an effort to ascertain why Trump's supporters would set aside reality and choose to believe his lies and undermine their own freedoms and rights in so doing, each warrants careful consideration. In particular, Trump's use of fear and his nearly continuous assaults on truth (e.g., contrary to his daily assertions

to the contrary, the ongoing Russian investigation was not launched for partisan reasons; Russia did interfere with the 2016 U.S. election, as a matter of established fact) to serve his personal ends are classically demagogic and their relation to all of the above factors and how they work to encourage political support among the willing rates sustained attention.

All of this still begs Arendt's central question of why those backing Trump are willing to tolerate policies that are undermining their regime as well as, very often, their personal interests as they support his scapegoating of an overwhelmingly innocent population. That fact in turn suggests at least two broader linked possibilities: a willful desire to be deceived, of the sort to which Arendt drew attention, or an inability to know better. The first alternative points to some form of mass hysteria predicated on fear of the type that enveloped much of the nation during the Red Scare of the 1950s. While Trump is much more dangerous than Senator Joseph McCarthy was, due to his position and persistent willingness to say anything to secure power, this possibility suggests that at some point the veil will fall from the eyes of millions, who will then repudiate Trump wholesale, as occurred with McCarthy. Whether such is occurring or will anytime soon is a matter of speculation. *Esquire* political columnist Charles Pierce has lately argued that Trump's decision to incarcerate migrant children and infants apart from their parents may have constituted his Rubicon in these terms.⁵ Only time will tell whether this latest Trumpian cruelty will persuade his partisans that enough is enough or whether, encouraged by his lies, they will call for still more draconian steps.

Notably, however, this sort of argument raises a second possibility that depends on Trump supporters overcoming their fears, nativism and angst on their own to see the broader picture of what his policies and stance are actually doing to them and to their nation's principles, long-term sustainability and standing abroad. Whether such is possible also remains to be seen. I will meanwhile choose to side with Pierce and hope that the polity writ large does indeed retain a capacity to make probative choices and that such a sea change in perspective among Trump's adherents can and will occur.

(Originally published July 2, 2018)

*This title is a play on Donald Trump's recent false and dehumanizing claim that Democrats want illegal immigrants to "infest our country." See Seipel, Brooke. 2018. "Trump: Dems want illegal immigrants to 'infest our

country,” *The Hill*, June 19, <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/392977-trump-dems-want-illegal-immigrants-to-infest-our-country>.

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¹ Kessler, Glenn. 2018. “In 497 days, President Trump has made 3,251 false or misleading claims,” *The Washington Post*, May 31. Available at:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/?utm_term=.88618bcd245. Kessler, the Post’s fact checker columnist, had tallied 3,251 lies in 497 days in office as of the end of May, according to a careful ongoing analysis by the Washington Post, and is lying in his public statements at an increasing rate.

² Stevenson, Chris. 2018. “Trump goes on offensive over immigration- but offers little over reunions of separated families,” *The Independent*, June 24. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-border-immigration-family-separations-migrant-nevada-heller-democrats-a8413906.html>.

³ Arendt, Hannah. 1968. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, Inc. (1951), p. 382.

⁴ Cohen, Roger. 2018. “Trump the European Nationalist Puts America Last,” *The New York Times*, June 24. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/22/opinion/trump-european-nationalists-viktor-orban.html>.

⁵ Pierce, Charles. 2018. “The Nation is Beginning to Realize the Full Extent of What It Did to Itself in November 2016,” *Esquire*, June 23. Available at: <https://www.esquire.com/author/7884/charles-p-pierce/>.

123 Prophetic Imagination and the Current American Governance Crisis

An acquaintance likes to describe the Old Testament Hebrew prophet Amos as the “truck driver” of the Bible’s seers, as he was straightforward, plain-spoken and fierce about his values and views. Those included, accurately, a belief that the northern kingdom of Israel would be destroyed. He was active as a prophet for only perhaps five years of his life (circa 750 BC) and was a vigorous critic of the Israelite rulers of that time. Amos unpopularity called for social justice for the rich and poor alike and did so in the name of a moral order that, in his view, existed prior to, and transcended any human regime.¹

Members of lectionary-based Christian denominations in the United States heard a reading from the Book of Amos on July 15 that shared the story of his banishment by King Jeroboam II for his temerity in challenging the regnant political regime:

Amaziah, priest of Bethel, said to Amos, ‘Off with you visionary, flee to the land of Judah. There earn your bread by prophesying, but never again prophesy in Bethel. For it is the king’s sanctuary and a royal temple.’²

Amos responded characteristically by suggesting he was not special, but a regular fellow who could not help but speak the truth:

Amos answered Amaziah, ‘I was no prophet, nor have I belonged to a company of prophets, I was a shepherd and dresser of sycamores.’³

Amos is an exemplar of the role of prophetic imagination and leadership in politics. He was a bold individual who was courageous enough to speak truth to power, irrespective of the consequences of his actions, embodying the definition of prophetic imagination. His punishment for doing so was severe, but that did not deter him in his course or prevent him from sharing the truth as he understood it. Here is how Walter Brueggemann has described the vocation practiced by Amos and other Biblical prophets:

The task of prophetic ministry [and, by extension, such leadership] is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.⁴

Amos and this form of leadership came to mind when I was in Amsterdam recently and visited the “Secret Annexe,” where Anne Frank and her family and some friends hid from the Nazis for two years until they were discovered, arrested and deported to death camps, in which all but one perished. Anne’s father, Otto Frank, survived and published his daughter’s diary, written during the family’s seclusion, after the war. That text has become iconic and has been read by millions around the world during the ensuing decades.⁵ Doubtless, it has so emerged not only as a result of Anne Frank’s obvious humanity, talent and integrity, but also because her reflections and her brief life stand as testimony to the costs of humankind’s bottomless capacity for unfounded and inane hatred and cruelty.

The Nazis sent Anne and her sister Margo and thousands of Jewish Dutch children (and youth from other occupied nations as well) to death camps to die of starvation or disease, or to be murdered on the grounds of Hitler’s monstrous lies about Jews as responsible agents for the economic and social woes Germany experienced following World War I. Indeed, a central question that has haunted historians of Nazism as well as citizens of that nation since World War II has been why so many Germans proved so willing to believe Hitler’s patently nonsensical claims scapegoating the Jews and conjuring a superior “Aryan race.” This matter is all the more grave today, as we now know that many Germans were well aware of the “Final Solution” and the Death Camps and chose not to challenge them.

Anne Frank’s too brief life and the potential she represented constitute a continuing prophetic reminder to humanity of the depths of depravity to which their species has too often descended and of the banality on which it has chosen to do so. Anne and her family and friends, along with other individuals murdered by the Nazis, including Etty Hillesum, of Amsterdam, and Hélène Berr, of Paris, have achieved widespread recognition as symbols of the costs of hate.⁶ Their fates stand as a continuing warning of what can occur when animosity blinds individuals and bloodlust fueled by contempt underpins political rule, rather than a cooler deliberation or prudential consideration of conditions.

This is all relevant in light of Donald Trump's recent behavior at the NATO summit and following his closed two-hour meeting with Russian dictator and President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, Finland on July 16. At the first, Trump argued, without any evidence, that Germany, one of this nation's most stalwart allies since World War II, is "totally controlled by Russia." At a Group of 7 (G7) Summit just weeks before, Trump contended that the other major U.S. allies—France, Canada, Germany and Italy, among others—should be seen as threats to the United States. He also stated that Russia should be readmitted to the G7 group of democratic nations, despite its invasion of Ukraine, documented assassinations of foreign nationals and its own citizens and its forced and illegal annexation of Crimea.

At a press conference with Putin, following their meeting, Trump repudiated the findings of the American intelligence establishment and the U.S. Senate that Russia meddled in the 2016 American election, choosing to believe Putin's denial instead. He went still further, suggesting that he might permit Russian investigators to interview a former U.S. diplomat concerning his tenure in that role. This last made a mockery of diplomatic immunity and was widely seen as inexplicable and worse. Trump's willingness to disavow his own government's findings in favor of accepting the claims of a tyrant, was broadly noted and condemned; even by a smattering of elected GOP leaders. These individuals have rarely challenged even Trump's most outrageous behavior during his tenure.

But while these arguably traitorous stances have been roundly criticized, they have not yet been the target of official Republican Party repudiation or indeed, of condemnation by the GOP's rank and file. If polling is to be believed, Republican voters are supporting Trump in his embrace of a violent dictator and disavowal of his nation's institutions and interests. This latest political and moral outrage builds on Trump's increasingly overt willingness:

- To support a virulent racism and mythical white racial superiority while concocting lies about immigrants and refugees as well as "cities on fire" and "lazy folks," aimed at "justifying" that stance;
- To lie continuously concerning scenarios that do not exist, such as Germany's supposed servitude to Russia or our principal allies as threats taking undue advantage of our partnership;
- To lie egregiously concerning the import and impacts of his administration's policies including, trade, environmental and tax choices—with, perversely, many of those decisions affecting those

supporting Trump supporters more adversely than any other groups in society;

- To assail U.S. democratic values and institutions, including freedom of the press and of speech as well as of voting on a nearly continuous basis by seeking to delegitimize the role of all of these except to the extent that those exercising them sycophantically support the President, whatever he may claim and irrespective of whether his assertions bear any relationship to reality.

Even as, incredibly, the nation debates whether its chief executive should be considered treasonous, these trends suggest that Trump is following the well-worn path of countless demagogues before him by mobilizing adherents on the basis of false and cruel scapegoating claims and ever more hostile and dehumanizing diatribes aimed at specific groups. However absurd and hackneyed, it is clear that many within the President's political party are now in the thrall of his contentions. It is similarly evident that many other elected GOP officials support Trump in fear of losing power should they call him out and his supporters choose to punish them at the ballot box. Still others back Trump because they are enjoying the short-term fruits of increased income or profits borne of the administration's trade, tax or environmental choices, whose long-term consequences look set to be calamitous for the nation.

While this situation may beggar the imagination and find one shaking one's head in anger and incredulity, it is hardly novel in human history, as World War II demonstrated. It now seems unlikely that millions of GOP partisans will soon repudiate Trump's false, fear-filled and nightmarish vision of the nation and world. Nonetheless, it is essential that modern day Amoses step forth with clear vision and fearlessness to declare that the central values and core purposes underpinning the United States regime are now under assault by a man without shame who is willing to exploit human capacity for prejudice to maintain power and secure self-aggrandizement.

While this path to unbridled cruelty and hatred is not new, it is clear Trump will tread it for as long as he is permitted to do so by the American citizenry. It is likewise plain that unlike Amos, Trump embraces no moral or justice claims beyond his own unalloyed and inexhaustible quest for idolization. In this propensity, he is the antithesis of a democratic leader. Indeed, no friend of freedom would seek to delegitimize his nation's values

and institutions to garner or attain power, a warning Amos voiced centuries ago. In this predilection, Trump is an eerily familiar and alarming character.

The long-time conservative political columnist George Will, outraged by just these trends championed by the president, concluded a recent commentary by wondering if anything other than power mongering may be animating Trump:

And, yes, he only perfunctorily pretends to have priorities beyond personal aggrandizement. But just as astronomers inferred, from anomalies in the orbits of the planet Uranus, the existence of Neptune before actually seeing it, Mueller might infer, and then find, still-hidden sources of the behavior of this sad, embarrassing wreck of a man.⁷

Will has the situation, and perhaps the outcome of the ongoing Mueller investigation into the Trump campaign's links to the Russians, just right. Meanwhile, friends of freedom and self-governance may hope that elected leaders, citizens, civil servants and journalists continue to practice prophetic leadership in attempts to warn the nation of what is befalling it and to stir the consciences of those willing to permit that turn, whatever their rationalizations. One may hope that many other Americans will exercise their right to vote and urge others to do so as well to stop the moral outrage now afoot in this nation. The implications of not doing so and failing collectively to address this blight on our governance meaningfully are simply too ugly to contemplate.

(Originally published July 30, 2018)

Notes

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⁴ Brueggemann, Walter. 1978. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p.13.

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124 A Calculated Attack on Human Rights and Dignity

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves of the obvious and occasionally we read something or converse with someone who shines a spotlight on the proverbial elephant in the room. I had just such a moment when reading a column by the conservative columnist Ross Douthat in *The New York Times*. Douthat used his essay, “The White Strategy,” to assess the Trump campaign and GOP electoral strategy to increase racial polarization to mobilize voters in 2016 and currently. Douthat carefully parsed Trump’s electoral margins and racialized rhetoric targeted to key demographic groups in 2016 in several midwestern states (which resulted in his Electoral College victory). While suggesting that outcome hardly constituted a vindication of the former businessman’s strategy, and making clear he did not embrace such a course himself, Douthat nevertheless observed:

Turning out disaffected whites is more politically effective than most people imagined after 2012, but white voters are ultimately too divided to make a ‘white strategy’ work as a foundation for a real governing majority.¹

I doubt I am the only person who read this analysis with incredulity and concern. Douthat suggested that Trump and the GOP had consciously adopted fomenting such division as their preferred and ongoing course. Meanwhile, once in office Trump has continued almost daily to stoke racial animosity and polarization by encouraging white identitarianism among his supporters. Douthat concluded that this stance is unlikely to win the next national election for the GOP:

But when those anxieties are translated into white-identitarian rhetoric, they cost Republicans not only minority votes but white votes as well, repelling anti-racist white suburbanites even as they mobilize some share of racially-resentful whites.

So even with a slower immigration rate, a slower pace of demographic change, the Republican Party would still need either some of the white voters Trump alienated or some of the minority

votes he didn't really try to win—and neither can be delivered by the white strategy alone.²

For the columnist, a “morally superior” winning alternative would,

recognize that Trump's populist rhetoric as well as his race-baiting helped win the white Midwest, and instead of a white strategy pursue a populist strategy shorn of white-identity appeals. Keep the infrastructure promises and drop the birther forays; pursue E-Verify but forgo the child-separating cruelties; be tough on China but stop vilifying black athletes; embrace nationalism but stiff-arm Confederate nostalgia.³

Even as Douthat argued that Trump should drop his “populist race baiting,” he concluded that neither Trump nor the GOP was likely to do so.

While Douthat, a respected national conservative, was surely justified in raising concerns about the President's and Party's ongoing race baiting and racial polarization efforts, the facts he treated are not only morally outrageous, but also completely antithetical to the founding principles and Constitution of the nation that individuals seeking elective office under the GOP banner routinely swear to uphold and serve. This is a diverse nation and one that has only grown more so, and that trend looks set to continue and to deepen. It is also a country that has long struggled to cope with that heterogeneity and that has done so unevenly and often amidst the imposition of tragic injustices. Nevertheless, this nation's declared ideals call for human equality, irrespective of race or any other characteristic. Indeed, however unevenly attained and despite the high price those pursuing progress in civil rights have too often paid, including a prolonged and bloody civil war echoes of whose divisions endure today, those core aims represent a precisely antithetical stance and course to Trump and the GOP's “strategy.”

So, the elephant in the room is how the nation's dominant political party and its titular head could embrace so patently cynical, anti-democratic and anti-American a course simply to win votes in the near term. This racist force, ultimately constructed on human fear and alarm concerning difference (the flight or fight instinct), cannot readily be controlled once unleashed. Trump and the Republican Party have nonetheless intentionally opened this Pandora's Box and actively encouraged a share of the country's population to hate, and to do so mindlessly and heedlessly, in order to garner votes, irrespective of the costs to the unity of the nation or to its animating

aspirations to assure the civil and human rights of all of its citizens. In adopting this course, Trump and his party have sullied the regime as a beacon of hope for freedom around the world, even as they have daily ostracized immigrants, African Americans and those evidencing any difference from a supposedly superior mythical white archetype. To watch this spectacle unfold is both sad and sickening. However obvious it may be to highlight the poison that has been loosed, it is essential to point up the destructive cynicism of those who released it as well, and for that very reason.

Apart from its ugly anti-democratic and corrosive impacts on human and civil rights, the GOP's "white strategy" exacerbates the difficulties that individuals who appear different (whether on the basis of religion, perceived disability, race, ethnicity, gender or other characteristic) daily encounter precisely because it legitimates discriminatory behaviors rather than encouraging all American citizens to accept human diversity as a foundational reality that has no bearing on the otherwise in-principle equal standing and dignity of all human beings. The poet and essayist Claudia Rankine has written powerfully of the effects of animosity for those who are its targets. In one such reflection she recalled witnessing a conversation with the philosopher Judith Butler in which that scholar noted that the very being of humans makes them vulnerable to the hurt and pain imposed by the hate-filled language of the sort Trump and others in the GOP routinely employ today,

For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. After considering Butler's remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present.⁴

Rankine's profound prose-poetry illuminates the harm visited on those stigmatized by an ongoing Trumpian politics of calculated cruelty. These costs are being levied in the name of a "White Strategy" and their toll in human terms is incalculable, laying aside their implications for the rights of all of the nation's citizens and for self-governance. One of our country's major political parties has shown itself willing to erode this nation's dearest principles as it subjects the standing and rights of a broad share of its population to daily assaults on their basic rights in the name of short-

term political power. Whatever one's partisanship, this situation should be unacceptable. No argument or rationalization can excuse, let alone explain, supporting this so-called "strategy" and the shameful costs it imposes on millions of this nation's residents each day. I am reminded of holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winning author Elie Wiesel's insight:

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.⁵

Just so.

(Originally published August 27, 2018)

Notes

¹ Douthat, Ross. 2018. "The White Strategy," *The New York Times*, August 11. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/11/opinion/sunday/the-white-strategy.html>.

² Douthat, Ross. "The White Strategy."

³ Douthat, Ross. "The White Strategy."

⁴ Rankine, Claudia. 2014. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, p. 49.

⁵ Wiesel, Elie. 1986. "Nobel Lecture: Hope, Despair and Memory," *The Nobel Prize*, December 11. Available at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/lecture/>.

Afterword by Anne Khademian

Education, Empathy and Pragmatism: To Govern Democratically is to Listen and Learn

From the earliest days of the American Republic, we in this nation have debated whether good governance is best pursued by means of “good” people and “good” ideas versus specific processes and structures and the iterative evolution of workable solutions. That is, Americans have asked whether our Republic would rise on the wings of the agrarian ideal, the citizen connected to the earth, schooled in civic virtue and the principles of democracy and engaged in collective decision-making addressing the needs of small towns across the country, or instead rise on the basis of ambition checked by ambition, one branch of government restraining the potential excesses of the other, one set of interests constrained by another, state governments checking inequitable or unworkable national policies, minority rights protected by limiting the ability of majorities to act unjustly.

Today, 230 years (plus) later, we are intensely engaged with both arguments. We ask what it means to be an American, what is civic virtue and how is it manifest, versus identifying processes that will protect individual rights and offer possible civic solutions. But, these conversations are occurring in the midst of the reality that the reach and power of the office of the presidency has grown strongly during the past several decades with the advent of new communication technologies and their accompanying capacity to amplify ideas regarding who and what should be considered politically “good.” This sea change in U.S. governance has challenged and stressed the limits of the country’s existing institutional processes and structures and inter-branch checks and balances. This turn raises the question of whether the nation’s political future depends upon a definition of “good” people and “good” ideas that excludes, marginalizes and criminalizes whole categories of people, or whether its future cast will be shaped by processes and representative structures that allow for full citizen participation and expressions of ideas via iterative choice processes that bring the public interest to fruition. Or, will the emergent power of the presidency drive public decision-making in ways that make irrelevant

individual character and community as well as process form and institutional structures, checks and balances?

We know that foundational ideas and choice processes and structures matter and that they are vital to the sustainability of our Republic. We know, too, that they matter in efforts to find and build solutions to complex problems that are important to motivate, to inspire, to limit and to qualify. We also know that both ideas and the decision processes and structures in which they are considered, when stretched, can test the limits of self-governance. Indeed, as Max highlights in the introduction to this book, individuals and the ideas they promote can be motivated by “avarice, cruelty and quest for power” as well as by “good and just action.” Well-designed decision processes, structure and checks and balances can ensure the representation of minority interests. That said, these Constitutional and institutional protections can also, if not well regulated by a deliberative populace and prudential leaders, tip the decision-making scale toward the interests of a minority of Americans. In short, compelling ideas advocated by compelling leaders can build consensus and drive decision-making, yet when these occur in the name of a specific advantaged group and are taken to an extreme, they can undermine the voice of vast swathes of the citizenry, destroy communities and constrain social possibilities.

The essays in this volume explore these challenging dynamics in American political and civic life during the last decade. Max is not hesitant to call out ideas he views as antithetical to democratic governance, or to the underlying public values of our country. He also is quick to point up acts of citizenship and leadership that advance and implement ideas that serve the entire citizenry. The destructive capacity of neoclassical economics, in the guise of neoliberalism, has elevated the idea of the market serving as a collective choice mechanism to the detriment of communities, government capacity and vulnerable individuals. The triumph of neoliberalism as the reigning public philosophy has led to a cavalier disregard for the Constitution and that inclination has been joined to the categorization of people based on difference and mobilized by manufactured fear, the divisions sewn by social media and the role of television and the web in promoting limited attention spans. The steady diet of soundbites from television especially has increasingly limited citizens’ capacity to listen critically, engage, discuss concerns and find common ground, essential capacities for citizen exercise of their rights and responsibilities in the democratic process. In response, Max has not hesitated to articulate his understanding of fairness, good

government, equality, community and leadership in this turbulent time. *Soundings* has routinely questioned our comfortable ways of knowing the world. The series stimulates discussion, challenges commitments to or acceptance of putatively “good” ideas and thereby contributes to an informed and thoughtful clash of ideas and iterative dialogue that fosters collective understanding.

Perhaps more important are the lessons that emerge amidst the dialogue and critiques in this *Soundings* volume that signal ways in which governance is mediated through education, empathy and pragmatism: Education is necessary to be critically aware and informed, empathy is essential to understand the circumstances and challenges of those with whom we disagree and pragmatism is critical to efforts to identify common ground. Each *Soundings* brings lived experience forward through an individual’s story, a community’s narrative, an author’s words or a lesson learned. Each *Soundings* educates, provides insight into those with whom we may disagree or fail to understand, presents a history that may have slipped through our memory, or revisits fundamental principles. Each *Soundings* suggests some way forward, whether it is by means of individual exercise of understanding and empathy or a renewed appreciation of the necessity of participation in our system of governance.

Two recent guests on the radio program, *On Being*, brought out these lessons in a powerful way—the current U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy Smith, and Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, Arlie Hochschild.¹ Introducing the conversation with Smith, *On Being* host Krista Tippett quoted an earlier statement by the Poet Laureate, that she was interested in “the way our voices sound when we dip below the decibel level of politics.” Prompted to say more, Smith described a discussion she had in Kentucky in a local library with mothers and their children, amidst a setting of exquisite natural beauty. The moms were wondering if their children could appreciate and take full advantage of the beauty around them in their daily lives, with technology and tight schedules constantly vying for their attention. “To me,” Smith noted,

that felt really exciting, more exciting than saying, ‘What’s your take on environmental protection?’ What do you look out and see, and what does it make you want to do, or what does it make you long for or want to protect in some way?²

The insight was pragmatic, finding ways to discuss what people care about and what they seek to protect and value, and thereafter to consider the implications of those insights for politics and policy-making. The language of policy and politics too often conditions its users for battle, rather than for conversation characterized by listening and learning in a shared effort to discover common ground.

Similarly, in her discussion with Tippetts concerning the sociology of emotion, Hochschild related a story about meeting with a member of the Tea Party as part of her research for her book, *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*.³ The woman with whom Hochschild spoke indicated that she loved to listen to the radio host Rush Limbaugh, with whom she shared a dislike of “environmental wackos” and more. Hochschild noted that she then paused to gauge whether her comments were bothering the professor: “You’ve told me that you come from ‘the other side.’ Is it hard for you to listen to me?” Hochschild told her it was not a problem because she had her “alarm system off, and I’m learning about you, and you are doing me such a big favor to share your thoughts. I can’t tell you how grateful I am.”⁴ The woman was surprised and noted, “I do that too [shut the alarm system off]. I do it with my kids. I do it with my parishioners.”⁵ Hochschild suggested that the practice of shutting off their individual internal alarm systems provided some “common ground” between them as doing so created a basis for establishing empathy and for finding a shared way forward.

Soundings is a reminder to speak our mind and our hearts and to stand up for what is important and vital in our lives. *Soundings* is also a recurring prompt to listen, to learn and to find common ground. Every now and then we must “dip below the decibel level of politics” to share ideas, points-of-view and to speak frankly about what matters most to us. Max is a dedicated citizen scholar of the grand experiment of democracy, whose deep knowledge and passion for self-governance can inspire and move us not only to fight for what is right, but also to hear what we are all saying and to understand why.

Anne Khademian, Professor, School of Public and International Affairs and Presidential Fellow, Virginia Tech

Notes

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