



THE
EROTIC
JUSTICE
HANDBOOK

ON OUR MODERN DIVIDE
& THE PATH TO FLOURISHING

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I. INTRODUCTION

A large part of my life's work has been navigating two competing aims: striving for societal acceptance, while creating space for nurturing my own and others' personal and spiritual development. I say these aims are 'competing' in the sense that the act of publicly proclaiming a path toward deeper self-acceptance has, at times, been met with ferocious societal disapproval and with many of its attendant consequences: bad press, baseless lawsuits, criminal investigations, and banishment from 'polite' company. Having gained some perspective along the way—from both my own journey and from the state of our American society—I hope to shed some light on the deep divisions currently plaguing our social and political landscape, and offer a path toward greater unity and social progress.

In the decades leading up to and including the rise of President Donald Trump, we began to experience a deepening sense of division about what exactly it means to be an American, and what type of society America is and should be. These divisions have become reflected in the deep and growing chasm between the political 'right' and 'left' that have ultimately resulted in violence, vitriol, hyper-partisanship, and a spirit of divisiveness perhaps more fundamentally threatening to America's social fabric than we've seen since the U.S. Civil War.

While the historical antecedents to our present state of ambivalence come from many sources, we are primarily concerned in this essay with examining the current state of play. In doing so we are attempting to create a sort of neutral ground where we can begin to deconstruct the barriers to mutual understanding and acceptance that we have erected around ourselves and between one another, and begin the work of recentering, unifying, and moving forward with a sense of collective purpose.

EQUAL THREAT, OPPOSITE ENDS

The right believes their imposition of control will keep the marginalized silent, almost as if enforced silence can be construed as consent to be governed. The left believes that their threats against individual freedoms—freedom of expression, association, and beliefs—should and will be met with conformity, almost as if 'conformity' could suffice as a valid social contract. Both sides completely miss the mark, and in doing, so create the real threat: division itself.

In 2020, we witnessed the results of both fallacies coming to the surface with each "side" convinced of the other's evil intentions and serious threat to democracy. The right believed that communism

and socialism were taking root in the left, particularly emanating from the likes of rising star, New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and longtime Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. The left, on the other hand, believed that a totalitarian regime on the order of Hitler or Soviet Russia was taking root in the form of the Trump administration. Each camp's dramatic displays of vitriol, violence, and hysteria were equally matched on the political stage, playing out in such dramatic theater as the Democrats' impeachment hearing circus, and Trump's incitement from the White House to his supporters to storm the Capitol on January 6, 2021. While there are real concerns with, and legitimate critiques of, the aims of both the left and the right, the rapid fraying of our civic institutions along partisan political lines is the real true and present danger we face as a nation.

The audacious exercise I am proposing in this essay is for all of us to thoughtfully examine every fact and opinion that differs from our own. When we can do this, we as a nation can move on from polarization to true diversity. I do not deny that this exploration can seem threatening at times, but I also believe it affords us the only opportunity to reach a deeper solution.

I aim to argue both sides with equal passion and reason, not to presuppose any given outcome, but to allow truth to emerge from an honest presentation of competing arguments. My intention is, first and foremost, to conduct an inquiry into truth. I want the passion and determination to fight for the underdog that characterizes the Democratic left to meet the facts and assertions set forth by the Republican right. I believe we can find a better way forward together when we are able to see ourselves from the other's perspective.

In doing so, we become the difference between a salad and a stew. A salad is a tossing together of disparate ingredients, whereas a stew brings the elements together into a savory blend while maintaining the distinct texture and flavor of each ingredient. This is the melting pot I imagine.

Truly listening to people with whom we disagree is surprisingly difficult to do. Jonathan Haidt notes in his book, *The Righteous Mind*, that studies show that those with unusually high intelligence are excellent at finding arguments that support their positions, but, when asked to find arguments to support the other side, fare no better than anyone else. Consider the study conducted by the Nobel-prize-winning psychologist and behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman: Participants were exposed to two sets of tables of data, one concerning the efficacy of a face cream (a matter that rouses relatively little emotion) and another that dealt with gun control (known to spike blood pressures). Everyone performed better at interpreting the face cream data, but those who were more intelligent were the most biased in their assessment of the gun control data, more often interpreting it to support the position they already believed. It gets worse, as Haidt writes, "...the more passionately we feel about something, the more likely it is that our reasoning is warped and unreliable." Cultivating our ability to hear the other side provides us with a useful bulwark against

our natural (and biological) tendency toward bias; it offers us a middle path that can help us to navigate through the stormy divisions and buffeting polarizations we are currently experiencing.

DIVISIVENESS IS THE TRUE THREAT

The real and present threats—divisiveness, polarization, and self-righteous dehumanization of the other—were utterly lost on ‘both sides.’ The union of the United States became a face-off of irreconcilable differences, with each side more willing to divide the baby than agree on a shared custody arrangement. The existential problem is that we cannot divorce one another without destroying ourselves in the process. But much more than that is that we need each other like the wings of a bird. For the United States to fly as the profound democracy that it is, for the example to the world that the United States is to be, we need both liberty and justice, which are the values that the right and left respectively have championed. These competing values are then to be mediated through a system of checks and balances that keep the right from running roughshod over the civil rights of the political minority, and prevent the left from establishing a nanny-state that impinges on individuals’ freedom and stamps out our unique identities in the name of enforced ‘equality.’ But because The U.S. Constitution creates a community of rights and obligations—both on the part of the individual and the government—we cannot view each of those rights and obligations within a vacuum. Our First Amendment rights, for example, grant us a shield against government intrusion into citizens’ free expression, but do not confer an unfettered license to defame and degrade others. Our Fourteenth Amendment right to equal treatment under the law is not a guarantee of equal outcomes to all, irrespective of ability or effort.

Similarly, we cannot demand self-abnegation as the price of inclusion. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all beings are created equal. Each of us is inalienably endowed by the creator with the right to life, liberty, and happiness. This guarantee, though, applies not just to the marginalized, the LGBTQ+, the woman, the person of color, and the poor, but also to the middle-class white male. No one should ever have to abandon their class, gender, or color identity to gain societal acceptance. The solution lies not in the grand arc of history in which the pendulum swings to this side and away from the other in rhythmic succession. Rather, it is the eradication of ‘sides’ while preserving the unique contributions of each.

That is the promise offered in return for the perilous, courageous work of nation-building. The quick-fix solutions of elevating the perceived righteous side abandons the deeper values of our Constitution, a document so elegant in nature that it carries with it a divine imprimatur. The question is not whether we can get on the “right side of history” but whether we can get on the only

right side that exists: the side with no side, the true realization of that equality.

POLARIZATION WEAKENS OUR SOCIETY

Paradoxically, both sides grow weaker and more susceptible to tyranny if they do not absorb the best of the other while eschewing the extremes of each. Our failure to do this work effectively can be observed in the belief each side seems to hold—that it occupies exclusive domain over truth and righteousness, and that the other side is irretrievably bankrupt of values, morals, and practical solutions. If you must dismiss the values of half of the country to prove your case, you are likely suffering from a lack of what the other side has to offer—because, in an overall societal sense, ‘They’ are ‘Us.’ Polarization creates a societal disability that causes people of opposing perspectives to overly simplify issues into good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, good vs. evil. That unyielding rigidity is the malady because it begins to impede progress toward our shared interests. Interestingly, while the disorder equally affects both sides, it presents different symptoms in each. If there is a “they” and “they” are the universal set of ‘bad’ and wrong and ‘we’ are the set of ‘good’ and ‘virtuous,’ you have been infected by the malady of polarization. You are suffering from an illness that causes mental rigidity and reduces a complex multivariate system such as a society into a single-variate dynamic—a ‘They vs. Us.’ When one is stricken with such a mental glaucoma, the lens through which they see the world dims until flesh-and-blood human beings are reduced to mere generalizations and labels. Thus, appeals to virtue—such as having empathy for the disaffected and marginalized, or a desire to reduce suffering or ‘level the playing field’—is perceived to be merely a smoke signal for the abstraction’s true motivation to foment hatred and exert control over the other side.

When “They” become merely an abstraction, libelous slurs usually ensue. “They’re” idiots, ignorant, racists, sexists, narcissists, elitists, illegals, fascists, socialists, woke, sleep, ‘lib-tards’ or ‘Trumpenprols,’ etc. Labels reduce complex humans to objects, thus diminishing our shared humanity and providing a fertile ground for hatred. This absolute shunning of each other permits very little room for nuance. The middle ground shrinks as all ground becomes contested, and even objective ‘facts’ become subject to heated dispute. We demand complete fealty to one side or the other and treat folks who wish to remain open to the strengths of each side like duplicitous traitors—RINOs, sellouts, Uncle Toms, corporatists, accommodationists, fascist sympathizers—leaving them cast out of one tribe and treated suspiciously by the other. Lost on us is the Aristotelian ideal of ‘virtue’ as a ‘mean’ or middle ground between extremes. Courage is the mean of cowardice and foolhardiness; temperance the mean between licentiousness and insensibility. While the extremes inform the mean, in terms of setting its parameters, virtue, the mean does not produce the extreme. Rather than signaling virtue, we should strive to attain the middle ground, for that is where the

substance of virtue can be found.

The irony is that neither of the two “sides” see that by upholding this dividing line down the middle—the hatred border—they ‘create’ the other. They become mutually reinforcing reflections of the other’s hatred—an almost Cartesian proof of existence: ‘I am because I hate you.’ When ‘They’ represents “pure” evil, ‘The cancer is the notion of a “they,” a hardened or reified notion of another human being. A few factors determine which side “they” fall on. The “they” may be a color, a gender, or a creed, with the belief that an inherent subset of qualities then follows categorically. What matters is that you fall on one side or the other. This is the illness. If you are black or gay or female then you are inferior or evil, says one group. If you are white, male, and a “patriot” then you are inferior and evil, says another group. Demonization becomes the process of the day when we lack a guiding principle of “love thy neighbor.” Just as hatred grows in a loveless marriage, hatred grew in our country, and came to infect the substance of our disparate strivings.

We feel an intense urgency to confront them with violence, to force a unification of opposites by eliminating the other. What were previously minor undercurrents of ‘race war’ or ‘civil war’ or a return to ‘Jim Crow’ or a violent uprising ‘Myanmar-style’ have, alarmingly, percolated to the surface of mainstream political discourse.

Force, though, always creates a counterforce. Under normal conditions, force and counterforce combine to promote progress—such as when the force of a person’s foot striking the ground propels them forward along the path. But under conditions of extreme polarization, opposing forces create friction, gridlock, clogging, and ultimately systemic disharmony and disease. The irony is that, because polarization creates a situation in which one side defines itself in terms of its opposition to the other, growing oneself requires magnifying the power of the other. Thus, we can excuse ever-increasing cruelty, antipathy, and aggression to finally annihilate the growing monster on the other side. What we do not realize in doing so is that we can never truly slay the monster, because our identity-in-opposition would also be destroyed in the process.

Still, we feel an addictive allure, an intoxication from entertaining fantasies of the other’s total capitulation, if not their complete destruction. But this would be a fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying outcome. It would be like cutting away the visible tumor but failing to stop the spreading cancer.

RECOVERING FROM THE ADDICTION TO HATRED

How is your addiction to hatred and control working for you? Our societal landscape is littered with the vestiges of hate, whether it be in the form of mass incarceration, burned-out riot grounds,

or newly erected fences around the U.S. Capitol. We can wrap whatever robes we want around it, claiming we are fighting for noble causes, but if we look at the methods we have employed, we are laid bare. Our unchecked contempt and resentment have run amok, employing ever more hatred and force. We are the addict who cannot imagine living without the bottle, and when problems arise, our only solution is to drink more.

The alternative, not only of abstinence but recovery, looks terrifying. While people call me idealistic, I believe my view is soundly rooted in true realism. I know what it will take for us to embark on a journey of true recovery as a nation. I am just one who is not postponing the real work of getting sober from the intoxicating poisons of hate and divisiveness. I am urging complete abstinence as the ground upon which we rebuild our nation. “What do you do then?” is often the next question. And just as we might say to an alcoholic, quit drinking and then we will answer that. We must agree, first and foremost, not to demonize each other.

LOVE CREATES THE GROUND FOR PROGRESS

I have been regularly dismissed as idealistic. The connotative power of how it was spoken held me, for a period, in a trance, because it was said as a criticism. I was being accused of being ignorant or ill-informed. “This issue is too serious for something so frivolous as love,” was the assertion. It took me a good period to recover enough to say, no, this issue is too grave not to employ love. There is absolutely one solution and that is love. There is no medicine potent enough to cure the ailment at the root. Love is radical in the true meaning of radical: the root.

Love is the cure. Love is the virtue. Love as a virtue is not the opposite of hate. Rather, love is the mean between repulsion and obsession. We should neither be repulsed by others nor obsessed with ourselves. Love, the native wisdom of those great leaders from Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr., is often cast as childish, naïve, and idealistic. To espouse love as the solution in 2020 was met with everything from cynicism to outright dismissal. How are we going to ‘love’ our so-called ‘enemy’ when he’s pointing a bible, or a gun, or a Confederate flag, or a BLM placard right in our faces? Dr. King’s impassioned “I Have a Dream” speech that powered a generation would have been written off as fanciful if uttered today.

Nothing requires greater rigor of mind, heart, and courage than love. Love is born of the constant vigilance we need to prevent us from fabricating the other. It is a courageous act. It takes courage to both stand your ground and listen without prejudice; to rise above suspicion and really hear what the other person is saying, especially when they seem to challenge our values and sense of identity. It takes courage to not turn away in disgust, but to admit that individuals can be of sound mind

and still have totally differing views. It takes temperance to respond with equanimity and justice. It is not a quick fix but requires a constant state of mindfulness. The upside is that we can produce a safe space within which we can mediate our differences of perspective in a spirit of trust and mutual uplift.

The question often arises in discussions around race. “But those ignorant hateful racists...” one class says about the tendency of one group to cast another as inferior based on the over-simplification of the identity. All the while that class is itself over-simplifying the position of the “racist” as inferior and in need of external rectification, usually by force.

The work of love, however, eschews such expediencies. What would heal both the “racist” and the “oppressed” requires slowness of method, care, vulnerability, listening, understanding, and respect. No human being has ever truly evolved under the oppression of the lash. If we want to bring about meaningful societal evolution, we must do the most dangerous thing conceivable: commit unflinchingly to respect each other. Respect does not mean endorsement. It says, ‘I will listen and trust that human beings, restored to their humanity by being heard, seen, and honored, do the right thing.’ Hatred is a contortion of human nature, usually born out of the inability to be heard by others. It can only be undone when we are willing to recognize that others have the same dignity and value that we do.

Once we have rid ourselves of hate by committing to love each other, we can then direct our primary efforts to developing and promoting our own unique positions on issues of mutual concern. We can take responsibility for our beliefs and values, rather than relying on our favorite political party’s generic checklist. Then, because we have held firmly to our commitment to respect each other, we can begin to dialogue with and share viewpoints with others who may differ with us. This is the realization of a mature democracy, where the brilliance of individuals makes for the greatness of the whole. Appreciate that those who differ are bringing a necessary ingredient to our melting pot. Appreciate those who uphold the law and those who question it. Both are necessary, provided there is the meeting ground of respect. Respect can only be given by those who have self-respect, and self-respect can only be garnered by those who have done the deep work of developing their unique viewpoints. Love then becomes a great work, not a delusional salve. To be of sound mind means having done the Socratic work of deep self-questioning, using our adversary’s sincere opposition as a stone to sharpen our own wit.

II. WHO CREATED THE RIFT?

The Republicans and Democrats of today bear a slim resemblance to their founders' visions. The Republicans started out as the party of the left, founded in 1854 by former members of the Whig Party for the express purpose of preventing the spread of slavery to the Western territories. The Republican Party ultimately became the party of Lincoln—leading emancipation, and eventually engaging in a civil war against slave-holding states who tried to secede from the U.S. The Republicans also represented a Northern economic elite, distinctly industrialist and corporatist, in opposition to the Southern agrarian aristocracy. They were seen as more globalist in their aspirations and economic framework (based on international trade), as opposed to the nationalist and more isolationist Democrats.

The Democrats represented the American right wing. Founded in 1828, the party stood for individual sovereignty and states' rights, and opposed corporatism and taxation. Up until the 1950s, the Republicans and Democrats faced off along traditional fault lines: Republicans championing women's suffrage but opposing unionization; and Democrats seeking to restrict black voting in the South, supporting workers' rights, and forming an entrenched Congressional majority (the 'Dixiecrats') that provided an effective bulwark against Republicans' more progressive civil rights agenda.

The strains of American politics came to a nadir in 1957 when avowed segregationist and South Carolina Democratic Senator Strom Thurmond staged the longest filibuster in U.S. history—speaking on the Senate floor for over 24 hours—to obstruct the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act. In opposing the 1957 Civil Rights Act, Thurmond declared it, "...another effort on the part of this President to dominate the country by force and to put into effect these uncalled for and damnable proposals he has recommended under the guise of so-called 'civil rights.'"

Of course, the legislation, which was championed by then-Senate majority leader and fellow Southern Democrat Lyndon Johnson, ultimately passed both houses of Congress and became law. And so began a gradual shift of the American right wing away from the Democratic Party and into the Republican Party, where it resides today.

Democrats consider themselves akin to Frances' 'liberal' parties, which were a product of the Enlightenment. The "left" was a simple reference to being seated on the left-hand side of the French Parliament. The French liberals offered an exciting new view that was meritocratic, non-religious, scientific, world centric, and rooted in the revered values of 'Liberte, Egalite, and Fraternite.' The

heart and intellect of today's Democratic Party stand for love, compassion, and inclusion. Today's Republican Party has embraced isolation, exclusion, and tribalism—a worldview more in keeping with yesterday's Democratic Party than with its own foundational roots.

Lately, we are all finding it difficult, to say the least, to stay rooted in our core values. We live in strange times. To understand what is happening in our increasingly polarized world, we must consider where we have come from. Understanding our foundations is vital as we step into a singularity, an unknown reality. The greatest democratizing force in history, the internet, has within a few short decades disrupted trends in politics, business, and culture in ways we never could have imagined before its arrival. On the one hand, we can connect to millions of other folks across the country and the world, including people with viewpoints we may never have encountered, and with such easy facility. On the other hand, the internet and social media afford us the option of retreating into tiny niches and subcultures, no matter how arcane or extreme. We can literally live most of our social lives in a virtual bubble of our own making.

Whether we use these new tools to expand our awareness or narrow our focus, it's clear that we are undergoing a great shift in consciousness. Children who were born after the iPhone are now becoming teenagers and live in a vastly different reality than the one in which their parents came of age. I wonder, how do we live responsibly in that world, understand the greater forces at play, and stay rooted in those core values we hold so dear?

When we shift from the love of victory to the love of truth, we can find each other in the middle. This kind of examination will take into consideration both sides of the political spectrum. Then, 'Theologos'—the voice of the divine—will have come into existence. I believe when we genuinely look, with curiosity and without agenda, that we will evolve to comprehend the current predicament of extreme polarization in which we find ourselves, and perhaps chart a clearer, more principled path to realizing our ideals. By presenting each view from inside their shoes, we will be able to determine what could possibly be happening from their perspective. If we fear each other, and hang it on the "other" side, we are missing the point.

THE LEFT SEES CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER FROM THE RIGHT

Many on the left are convinced the right poses a "clear and present" danger to the country. Although the Democratic Party won the 2020 Presidential election, people on the left remain wary of Trump's post-Presidential agenda. They feel they have a vested interest in neutralizing Trump as a political factor, given what they see as the ongoing danger he poses. Several states, including Georgia,

Nevada, and Pennsylvania, began investigations into the Trump campaign's post-election attempts to delegitimize the election results and declare himself the winner. The state bar associations of both New York and Washington, D.C. attempted to foreclose Trump's legal operations by suspending the law license of Trump's lead election lawyer, Rudy Giuliani.

While the potential remedies for Trump's alleged political 'crimes' seem less clear, Democrats in Congress have pressed ahead with efforts to investigate Trump's abuses of power, including investigations into the Trump DOJ's surveillance of members of Congress and major media outlets. They also voiced grave concerns that Trump's policies while in office, such as removing inspectors general from the DOJ and other agencies, upset the balance of powers that prevents our democracy from descending into totalitarianism. There is an overall sense by both the left and many on the right that Trump's unseemly conduct in office deserves some sort of censure and punishment, if only as a deterrent against future abuses by the Chief Executive. What is clear to some who ascribe to the view of the left is that Trump seemed to have read, memorized, and mastered the playbook for totalitarianism, dictatorship, white supremacy, and hatred.

From the left's perspective, perhaps the most ominous, immediate threat the right poses to democracy is voter suppression. Protecting voting rights must be addressed now with the greatest of urgency, they assert, lest we find ourselves under a regime that threatens to have Trump run again in 2024 and, with the benefit of voter suppression, finagle a win in the electoral college. Failing to implement a stalwart barrier to voter suppression at the Federal level might result in a Republican-controlled state legislature refusing to certify a Democratic winner and overturning the election result in favor of Trump. The refusal to accept the people's democratic judgment is reminiscent to many on the left of the actions not just of autocratic rulers abroad but also of scenes from the United States' own history—notably the Jim Crow era which we thought we had left behind.

In a piece published in *The Washington Post* in August 2020, noted academics Suzanne Mettler and Robert Lieberman set out four primary threats to democracy that are frequently encountered across the globe: (1) global political polarization, (2) the concentration of power in the hands of our nation's top leader, (3) increased disparity in economic class, and (4) conflict over membership in the political community. They observed that, while any one of them threatens to jeopardize the democratic process, rarely have we faced all four on a global scale. The United States has traditionally served as the beacon of global democracy. Trump's stewardship at the helm helped foment American instability not witnessed perhaps since the Civil War. The left believed it also signaled to the world that America is no longer willing to uphold and protect democratic ideals. Trump's apparent coddling of dictatorships—in Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the Philippines, for example—was believed to have widespread destabilizing effects on grassroots democratic movements around the world.

While democracy is likely to bounce back from any one threat, Mettler and Lieberman believe, the simultaneous emergence of all four should inspire grave concern. This, along with Trump's cult-like following and disregard for both law and decency, are glaring red flags to those on the left.

From the left's perspective, the Trump administration witnessed the fall of pillars of democracy and the rise of a cult of personality. They pointed to an increase in the prevalence of inflammatory gender and racial slurs in common discourse, and the fact that Trump appeared to make a mockery of the dignity of the office of the President. "Anyone can act Presidential," he boasted before a raucous crowd of supporters at a 2018 rally in Tampa, FL, but, "it's a lot easier to act Presidential than to do what I do." But far more dangerous than his indecorous conduct while in office is that, as Trump departed from the Presidency, he attempted to delegitimize the authority of the incoming President by contesting the election, failing to show up for the inauguration, and, since leaving office, issuing specious press releases adorned with a faux Presidential seal—likening himself to a ruler-in-exile.

The left also feared that Trump worked to destabilize other governmental institutions, most notably the courts and executive agencies. As evidence of this, they pointed to his unprecedented practice of circumventing the 'advice and consent' of the U.S. Senate in confirming political appointees to lead agencies, and instead relied on interim appointments that did not require Senate confirmation. This had the destabilizing effect of eroding the policy-making ability of the agencies, and subjecting 'acting' agency heads to the threat of immediate dismissal should they veer in any way from absolute fealty to Trump himself.

The left showed that, at one point in 2019, three of the most important executive branch posts had 'acting' agency heads: The Department of Defense, the Homeland Security Agency, and the Department of the Interior. And, in March 2020, a federal judge blocked a policy granting asylum seekers less time to prepare for initial screening interviews because the 'acting' director of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Agency had exceeded the 90-day grace period for Senate confirmation and therefore lacked Constitutional authority.

As reports emanating from former President Trump's appointees at the Departments of Justice and Defense come to light, it seems clear to the left that Trump exerted pressure upon administration officials to defy the will of the American voters and install him as the next President. To the left, it appeared not so much of a leap then but a small step to conclude that America came dangerously close to encountering one of the greatest horrors imaginable in a Democracy—a President seizing office by force and suspending the Constitution.

We can look to the 1790s to see the split between the Federalists and the Republicans and the

conflict this brought to the antagonistic election of 1800. Then, like now, the left believed the Republic faced an existential threat to its future. The deadlocked results could easily have thrown us back into a monarchy. The Trump administration and his “King baby” status has strong echoes to a more barbaric time. Were it not for a single Federalist switching support over to Thomas Jefferson, we could have experienced an insurrection the likes of which we saw on January 6, 2021, in Washington, D.C., under the urging of Donald Trump.

WHO ARE THE BELONGERS?

Decisions related to who belongs here and how they rank within our political hierarchy are often fraught with ambivalence. The question of belonging played out around racial, ethnic, and gender lines almost from the beginning of the Trump candidacy in 2015 when he declared that immigrants from Mexico are “bringing crime. They’re rapists.” The left heard in Trump’s statement a clarion call for a nativist ‘America First’ ideology and a dividing line emerged, along which many voters decided whether to support Donald Trump or to oppose him. Race, nationality, and ethnicity continued to percolate through the 2016 election and ultimately erupted on an August night in 2017 in the form of a ‘Unite tThe Right’ rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The rally’s organizers intended to protest the proposed removal of Confederate statues in Charlottesville (and nationwide) and to voice a wider set of grievances about the social marginalization of white males and, in their eyes, the declining significance of Anglo-Christian culture. In a scene reminiscent of Kristallnacht in pre-war Nazi Germany, a sizable contingent of white men marched with fiery tiki torches through the University of Virginia campus, chanting, “Jews will not replace us!”

Over the course of the Trump administration, the question of who ‘belongs’ ballooned into a question of whether people identifying as transgender belong in the military, whether African Americans belong on the voter rolls, and whether immigrants—particularly those from non-European nations—belong in the country at all. As these divisions between the ‘woke’ progressive left and the ‘revisionist’ and regressive right grow wider and more contentious, we face even greater danger of weakening and division. For many on the left, Donald Trump’s rhetorical attacks on immigrants belies a truth that seldom receives the degree of public discourse it deserves. America relies, to a great degree, on the presence of undocumented immigrants to perform tasks that were formerly performed by slaves or Black Americans during de jure segregation—and under working conditions that true ‘belongers’ would be legally shielded from. We do not get cheap agriculture, or construction, or service industry by paying minimum wage plus health benefits, paid time off, and following workplace safety laws. We get it by assigning those jobs to non-belongers.

People with a viewpoint from the left use the January 2017 incident where Trump banned travel from seven predominantly Muslim countries as him making a line in the sand of who belonged. This move was blocked in federal courts, largely because Trump himself had labeled it a “Muslim ban”—and thus an impermissible violation of freedom of religion. After the ban was struck down a second time, he revised the order again, restricting immigration and business and tourist visas from eight countries including Iran, Libya, Chad, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, North Korea, and Venezuela. The ban was upheld in 2018 by the Supreme Court.

In 2018, Trump suggested to NFL players who took a knee during “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “Maybe you shouldn’t be in the country.” To the left, this signaled that Trump viewed anyone who did not agree with him on demonstrating unquestioned loyalty to law enforcement did not belong here.

Perhaps no issue about who truly belongs has been more contested than who gets to vote in our elections and—even more alarmingly—which votes should be considered ‘legitimate.’ Early in the 2020 election campaign, Trump laid down a rhetorical gauntlet. “The only way we’ll lose,” he repeated, “is if they rig the election.” The ‘they’ presumably included the entire election apparatus of the United States. When Trump actually did lose, the initial blame rested on the battleground states of Pennsylvania and Michigan where, his supporters alleged, massive voter fraud had occurred only in the precincts in which African American voters held the majority. According to the left, despite offering no evidence of fraud, the Trump administration launched a barrage of seemingly frivolous lawsuits seeking to have the results of those precincts—and only those precincts—thrown out. After the 2020 election, 86 lawsuits were filed attempting to challenge results in at least six key states.

From the viewpoint of almost all people on the left, Trump took extraordinary measures to overturn the results of the 2020 election, relying on conspiracy theories and lawsuits, and fomenting the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Allegedly, White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows lobbied then-‘acting’ Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen to investigate an election conspiracy theory promoted by Q’Anon that Italian military satellites were used to alter election results. When Rosen finally refused to cross this line, deeming it too farcical, Trump sought to have him replaced with a more malleable acolyte.

In hindsight, it seems obvious that those lawsuits were not intended to win in courts of legal jurisdiction, but from the left’s perspective, to advance the argument of illegitimacy in the court of public opinion. The fact is, MAGA’s mind was already made up and could not be unmade. The only way ‘we’ could have lost the election was if ‘they’ rigged it. ‘We’ lost, ergo the election was rigged.

Thus, the quixotic quest for the rigged votes and their riggers need not reach any logical conclusion, since it is impossible to prove a tautology.

WIDENING ECONOMIC DISPARITIES GIVE RISE TO POPULISM

One of the features of the rise of populism is that when people feel left out of the political system, they are more likely to accept leadership that is willing to circumvent or obstruct ‘constitutional’ processes in pursuit of more ‘equitable’ political outcomes. Growing economic inequality is a major breeding ground for populist movements. In the U.S. this is exemplified by great wealth amassed over the past several decades by the corporate sector in general and even more glaringly in the information and communication technology sector. Amazon co-founder Jeff Bezos’ net worth of over \$200 billion (as of the writing of this essay) dwarfs the income of the average Amazon employee to such a degree that, according to some reports, he could give each of Amazon’s 876,000 full-time employees a \$105,000 bonus and still retain his perch at the top of the world’s richest man list. While Bezos may represent somewhat of an aberration in this regard, in 2015 the average corporate CEO’s compensation amounted to 320 times the average employee’s, according to a New York Times analysis, up from an average of six times average employee compensation in 1989. While rapid technological improvements may account for a large part of this growing disparity, other factors, including a favorable corporate tax code, anti-union laws, and offshoring (and onshoring immigrant) labor and manufacturing to low-wage countries such as China, compound the inequalities and greatly disadvantage laborers’ ability to bargain for higher wages.

From the left’s perspective, the new “ultra rich” control so much of the nation’s wealth that they can subvert the cornerstones of democracy to preserve their class advantages. The more alarmist among them pointed to Hitler’s rise and his ability to secure the backing of Germany’s industrialists before completely taking over the machinery of government and declaring himself the Fuhrer. Indeed, the left saw corporate America and Wall Street’s initial embrace of Trump as a cynical ploy to co-opt Trump’s populist message and push through a slate of initiatives—cutting taxes on corporations and wealthy individuals and eliminating workplace safety and environmental regulations—that specifically benefited them. This was supposed to be the payoff that muted their objections to Trump’s erratic behavior and autocratic tendencies.

Like Hitler, the left argued, Trump gave voice to the legitimate frustrations of the working class (or, as The New York Times put it, the ‘white working class’), vowing to bring back good American jobs, punish companies for offshoring manufacturing, increase tariffs on imported goods, and stem the flow of cheap undocumented labor that effectively suppressed American workers’ wages. But what

he actually did while in office, in the left's view, was plot a massive giveaway to corporate America and the wealthy elite under the guise of a 'middle class tax cut' which allowed corporations to repatriate an estimated \$2 trillion in overseas profits tax-free and drastically reduced corporation's regulatory expenses. According to the left, he also exploited the nation's natural resources reserves on an unprecedented scale—rushing through the Keystone pipeline without appropriate environmental analyses and opening Alaska's pristine Tongass National Forest to private logging operations. On his way out of office, he rushed to auction off mineral exploration leases of vast swaths of federal land to oil and gas companies. Many on the left saw this as further evidence of Trump's rapacious greed and cronyism.

While this corporate land grab greatly benefited the wealthy elite, the left argued, little if any of these benefits were passed on to the American worker. For example, while unemployment in 2019 reached a 40-year low of 3.5%, there were only modestly corresponding increases in worker wages, suggesting a decline in the quality of work available. According to Pew Research, wages among Americans in the upper middle- and highest-income tiers grew by 50% from 1971 to 2015, while wages among the lower middle and lowest tiers—accounting for the largest sectors of employment growth—grew by only 16%. Furthermore, labor force participation rates continued a multi-decade decline especially concentrated among working-age males. For every man looking for work, there were another three neither working nor looking for work, as reported by political economist Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute. The left would sum this up by saying, Trump's populist rhetoric and policy initiatives did little to reverse the decades-long slide in middle class prosperity, and some sectors, especially those affected by Trump's trade wars, got decimated. Agriculture suffered crippling export declines as China retaliated in kind against American tariffs. Farm bankruptcies spiked by 19% in 2019, and farmer suicides leapt by an alarming 18%. Wisconsin, home to the country's largest concentration of dairy farms, suffered a 10% decline in dairy farming in 2020 alone—the largest annual decline in state history.

Perhaps most alarmingly for the left, however, was the fact Trump's rhetoric directed populist fervor against the most vulnerable segments of the U.S. population—undocumented immigrants. In 2019, ICE conducted large-scale round-up operations among several Mississippi poultry farms, netting more than 680 arrests and deportations of undocumented immigrants. Notably, not a single plant owner or operator was arrested or fined for violating immigration laws.

Trump's immigration policy was a key component of his "America First" program, which attempted to protect the American workforce and markets. He was especially determined to reduce asylum seekers, end the privileges for children who arrive in the United States under DACA, and build a wall along the Mexican border (our third-largest trade partner). From the left's perspective, he

looked for all possible means of deterring migrants from crossing the border, asking his staff to investigate building moats with snakes and alligators, electrified fences with skin-piercing tips, and asking whether migrants could be shot below the waist for throwing rocks.

In September 2017, the Trump administration issued an executive order rescinding DACA under the claim it was “an unconstitutional exercise of authority by the executive branch” (the Supreme Court later rejected the rescission). The battle over DACA led to the longest government shutdown in history (35 days).

In 2018, Trump suggested the U.S. deport migrants without due process: “We cannot allow all of these people to invade our Country. When somebody comes in, we must immediately, with no Judges or Court Cases, bring them back from where they came.”

During a “zero tolerance” immigration crackdown by ICE beginning in April 2018, 2,000-4,000 children were separated from their parents, including 22 cases where children were taken without due process. Child detentions skyrocketed to over 250,000 in 2019, many staying past the 72-hour allowed limit. In January 2019, DHS implemented the “Remain in Mexico” policy, which sent over 65,000 non-Mexicans back into Mexico to wait while their claims for asylum were being processed.

At one point Trump considered completely sealing the border with Mexico, an option that the left believed would have carried major political and trade costs. In addition to the erosion of civil rights for political refugees and the impact of separating children from their families, it is estimated the effects of these policies would reduce cumulative GDP over 10 years by \$4.7 trillion in the form of lost cross-border trade.

OVER-CONCENTRATION OF POWER IN THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

By the 2018 midterms, it was clear to many on the left that Trump had very little interest in pursuing a legislative agenda, especially one that would have him compromise with the new Democratic majority in Congress. Instead, Trump began to rule by executive order, issuing edicts covering everything from prescription drug prices, to banning critical race theory, to funding the border wall. The irony of Trump’s record-setting pace of issuing executive orders (196 in total—far exceeding those of any preceding President) was not lost on the Democrats who noted that Trump and other Republicans had bitterly complained about President Obama’s frequent use of executive orders, and they made it a central issue of the 2016 Presidential campaign.

Trump minced no words when, in 2018, he said, “The saddest thing is that because I’m the President

of the United States I'm not supposed to be involved with the Justice Department, I'm not supposed to be involved with the FBI, I'm not supposed to be doing the kinds of things I would love to be doing and I'm very frustrated by it." The viewpoint of the left is that he frequently criticized judges for not supporting his interests, calling them "Obama judges," and in one case denounced U.S. District Judge Gonzalo Curiel for not supporting him in a case against Trump University, calling him a "hater" and "Mexican" (he was born in and spent his entire life in the U.S.), claiming his Mexican heritage made him a biased jurist.

Upon entering office, Trump invited FBI Director James Comey to dinner, asking him several times to pledge his loyalty to him, saying, "I need loyalty, I expect loyalty." As a member of the legislative branch, Comey is precluded from pledging loyalty to anything but the U.S. Constitution. Trump later implored Comey to "let go" of the investigation into former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn's role with Russia in the 2016 election. According to Comey and the left, Trump made blatant interference into an FBI criminal probe, which constitutes obstruction of justice.

The Justice Department subpoenaed Apple for account information of their own White House counsel Don McGahn (along with his spouse and child), as well as two Democratic members of the House Intelligence Committee, Adam Schiff and Eric Swalwell, who led Trump's two impeachment trials. In 2020, the DOJ, under then-Attorney General William Barr, surreptitiously obtained phone records of Washington Post reporters following their coverage of Russia's role in the 2016 elections. The left alleged that by assuming such broad authority to interfere with executive branch agencies, and by circumventing Congress and the federal judiciary, Trump seemed to be saying, in effect, 'Letat c'est moi'—harkening back to the famous last words of French despot Louis XIV who believed he alone expressed the will of the state and the people in it.

While Trump clothed himself in the mantle of 'patriotism' and 'America First,' to the left his actions seemed close to despotism and 'me first.' He exalted foreign dictators, including Vladimir Putin and Philippines strongman President Duterte, as if overlooking their track records of horrible human rights abuses and marveling at their total authority. In response to questions about his relationship with North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un, Trump responded, "He speaks, and his people sit up at attention. I want my people to do the same." At the same time, according to the left, he began to challenge our traditional allies, issuing trade sanctions against Canada and pressing NATO to take on a larger share of the costs of protecting Europe. The left viewed Trump's behavior as unpatriotic, undemocratic, and reckless.

The left allege that Trump's rampant abuses of executive authority did not stop there. He refused to disclose his tax returns as other Presidents had before him dating back to the 1970s, and refused

to either divest himself of his sprawling business empire or, as previous Presidents had done, place it in a blind trust while in office. He hired personal friends, family members, and close business associates for official positions, which the left said blurred the lines between the office of the Presidency and his own personal fiefdom.

During the 2016 Presidential campaign and over the course of his presidency, Trump relentlessly demonized and attacked the press, referring to them as “the enemy of the people,” “scum,” “bad people,” and “some of the worst human beings you’ll ever meet.” The left declared he incited violence against members of the media, once posting a meme video showing him body-slammng the CNN logo in a wrestling match and praised a Republican congressman who assaulted a reporter. He castigated mainstream news outlets as “fake news,” sued The New York Times, CNN, and The Washington Post for libel, and engaged in federally sanctioned interference in the business dealings of the owners of CNN and The Washington Post.

He advocated for changes in libel laws to legally punish social media platforms that blocked conservative content and canceled the White House press credentials of reporters he did not like. The left viewed all this as a clear and unequivocal violation of the First Amendment. The democrats believe that when Trump realized he could not control the questions coming from reporters in the briefing room, he suspended White House press briefings for over a year.

The left would claim that Trump repeatedly encouraged violence against protestors, migrants, and criminal suspects. After Virginia became a Democratic state in 2019, he encouraged his supporters to “liberate” Virginia, Michigan, and Minnesota to preserve the Second Amendment. When some protestors did in fact breach the Michigan State Capital, he tweeted to the Democratic governor that she should make a deal with them. On the other hand, the left would maintain, he urged law enforcement officers to be rough with criminal suspects, saying, “Please don’t be too nice,” when lowering them into the paddy wagon.

During the protests following the death of George Floyd, according to WSJ reporter Michael Bender and the side of the left, Trump suggested that law enforcement “beat the f-out” of protestors, saying, “Crack their skulls! Well, shoot them in the leg—or maybe the foot. But be hard on them!” Finally, toward the end of his presidency on January 6, 2021, after telling his supporters at a rally, “you’ll never take back our country with weakness,” and, “we will never concede,” they stormed the Capitol building, leading to the deaths of seven people, the beating and stabbing of law enforcement officers, and injuries to over 140 people.

In 2020, the Secret Service and Park Police dispersed tear gas and smoke bombs into a crowd of peaceful protestors near the White House where Trump stood nearby at St. John’s Church for a

photo op with a bible. The administration also deputized federal law enforcement officers across multiple agents, deploying them in Portland and Chicago as a show of force to quell protests and increasing violence.

The left proclaimed Trump an increasingly dangerous threat who used his bully pulpit to obstruct, circumvent, or overturn many of the traditions and customs of the office of the President.

III. THE DEMOCRATIC DRIFT

The painful truth, according to the right, is that while the left ‘means well,’ their actions are threatening the core values of democracy: due process, equal protection before the law, freedom of expression, the separation of powers, and the accused’s presumption of innocence, among other excesses. The right would attest that those foundational principles are being undermined, not only by the Democratic Party, but also by the bustle of left-leaning institutions advancing a progressive agenda, from college campuses to social media companies, to workplaces and think tanks.

MARGINALIZING THOSE WHO SEEK COMPROMISE

Van Jones, a longtime community organizer and former Obama administration official, was politically sidelined by the left-wing media after he sought to work with the Trump administration on prison reform.

Although Jones has been a vociferous critic of what he believes to be Trump’s bad behavior, he nonetheless joined with Trump and other Republicans on a cause of mutual concern for all Americans: prison reform. From the left’s perspective, America’s prisons have become merely a vast warehouse to excessively punish the poor and minorities for nonviolent, drug-related offenses. More than one out of every five African American males have cycled through the criminal justice system, many of them beginning the journey as children in what some cynically refer to as the ‘school to prison’ pipeline. One of the tragic consequences of over-incarceration in the black community is that many black males cannot secure good jobs that can maintain families. Thus, black families continue to experience disintegration and decline—compounding the problem and creating a multigenerational cycle of imprisonment and economic marginalization. Jones, a Yale-trained lawyer, not only sees prison reform as a ‘black’ issue, but also as a broader societal issue. He also sees the other side of the coin: the plight of victims of violent crimes who have had their lives destroyed when they or a loved one is senselessly murdered or seriously harmed. He spent the first few years of the Trump administration (also corresponding with his being cast into the media ‘wilderness’) touring the country and bringing crime victims and their perpetrators together, trying to achieve true reconciliation and healing—also a core principle of criminal justice.

The right saw criminal reform from a totally different vantage point. They view the criminal justice system, including prison, as an essential pillar in maintaining law and order. Trump, in fact, campaigned as a ‘law and order’ candidate and declared himself early on in his Presidency to be

a ‘law and order’ President. He championed law enforcement and began pursuing long-dormant criminal enforcement efforts on the federal level, including resuming the federal death penalty, which had been placed on hold for over two decades. In 2019, then-U.S. Attorney General William Barr directed the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to adopt an addendum to the Federal Execution Protocol—“clearing the way for the federal government to resume capital punishment after a nearly two-decade lapse and bringing justice to victims of the most horrific crimes.” The problem with the current state of the criminal justice system, from the right’s perspective, was its runaway expense. Crowded court dockets and overcrowding in prisons—both at the state and federal levels—reduced the efficacy of the entire system, and led to skyrocketing costs, largely born by the states which house, administer, and secure almost two million inmates. The right saw efforts to reduce incarceration rates among nonviolent offenders as a practical means of reducing the fiscal and administrative burdens on local and state governments.

After working on the passage of the First Step Act, a bipartisan bill that Trump said includes “reasonable sentencing reforms,” Van Jones praised President Trump for making progress on an issue that divided America for generations. However, after celebrating the victory, people on the left quickly came out against Jones for standing with Trump. In an interview, he shared, “It’s nothing more painful as a Black man, to have somebody call you a sellout, a coon, Uncle Tom.” Here the left was getting something it said it wanted, but because it came from Trump, it was rejected as insufficient and unproductive. It is claimed Trump later told his son-in-law and close advisor Jared Kushner, who had urged him to take up prison reform as a way of reaching out to the black community, that he regretted doing so because it earned him no love among black voters.

MISUSE OF STATE INSTITUTIONS TO PURSUE A PARTISAN AGENDA

Desperate to remove Donald Trump from office, the Democratic Party embroiled Congress in a battle over Trump’s ties with Russia that lasted for most of Trump’s four-year term. While the left argued Trump’s conduct was certainly not Presidential, there was no realistic threat that Russia had taken the political leadership captive, nor that it warranted deploying so much of the Democratic Party’s political firepower toward what was effectively a move to oust Trump rather than a genuine concern for the health of our democracy. The left, which had long championed an end to the decades-long ‘cold-war’ between the U.S. and Russia, seemed eager to restart one if it meant defeating Trump. This scorched-earth, win-at-any-cost mentality by the left incensed many Trump supporters (even those who view Russia as an adversary) and helped entrench support for Trump among the right wing of the party.

PUNISHMENT THAT EXCEEDS THE CRIME

The strident demands of the #metoo movement led to an alarming expansion in U.S. sex trafficking laws that carry long minimum sentences. The allegations against Bruce Weber, a gay fashion photographer accused of inappropriately coercing five (muscle-bound) male models into performing a ‘breathing exercise’ as part of his photoshoots, was alleged by his accusers to have engaged in illicit ‘sex trafficking.’ The lawsuit based this allegation on a ruling by a judge in the Harvey Weinstein case that his conduct met the standard for the application of a federal sex trafficking statute. The Weinstein judge’s narrow ruling held that, “While the instant case is not an archetypal sex trafficking action, the allegations plausibly establish that [Harvey Weinstein’s] 2014 conduct violated [a federal law]” that prohibits the use of force, fraud, or coercion sufficient to compel a commercial sex act. From the right’s perspective, sex trafficking laws are being so expansively interpreted, used to find coercion on a hair trigger, that they invite the government into almost every sexual encounter; if someone in power doesn’t like the smell of the power dynamics, they can easily declare the ‘offending’ party a sex trafficker.

The left’s vantage point, abuse of federal law to achieve a presumably socially desirable outcome harkens back to the early 1900s when black prize fighter and heavyweight champion Jack Johnson drew the ire of many whites who viewed his having soundly defeated white boxing champions as an affront to their notions of white supremacy. After years of targeting Johnson with frivolous and trump-up criminal charges, they finally succeeded in convicting Johnson of violating the ‘Mann Act’ in 1913, alleging that he had transported a white woman (one of his many lovers at the time) across state lines “for immoral purposes.” He was sentenced to a year in prison. Notably, when President Trump posthumously pardoned Johnson in 2019, the left begrudgingly accepted it as a ‘token gesture’ designed to distract the public from his attacks on black athletes who publicly protested police brutality. The right viewed the left’s position as ironic, given that today it is primarily the left that weaponizes the sex trafficking laws in pursuit of its own quest for ideological supremacy.

SUPPRESSION OF FREE SPEECH AND THE IMPOSITION OF ‘TRUE-SPEAK’

Leftist activists at the University of California at Berkeley, a place that gave birth to the Free Speech Movement of the late 1960s and which stood, at one time, for the principle that even unpopular speech should be allowed a platform, has now become a center of a firestorm over blocking conservatives from speaking on its campus. In 2018, when conservative provocateur and pundit Milo Yinnapoulos was invited to speak at Berkeley, the campus literally burst into flames, as students rioted, throwing stones and fireworks at police, shattering windows, and injuring several

bystanders. The right could not help but note the irony of a campus that had literally thrown out the rulebook on standards for controversial speech on college campuses a generation ago now becoming the epicenter of a movement to curtail speech its students deemed inappropriate.

At other campuses around the country, conservative speakers have been jeered and attacked for merely presenting their viewpoints. Harvard sociologist Charles Murray, who wrote *The Bell Curve*, a controversial treatise on the biological (and racial) origins of intelligence and IQ, was shouted down and prevented from speaking by students during a presentation at Middlebury College in 2017. An open letter to the university's administration signed by hundreds of Middlebury alumni argued, incredulously, "...this is not an issue of freedom of speech...we find the principle does not apply, due to not only the nature, but also the quality, of Dr. Murray's scholarship." From the right's perspective, this selective, post-ante carve-out for forbidding speech based on its 'quality and nature' failed the smell test.

Canada's Bill C-16 was passed in September 2016, which mandated the use of gender-neutral pronouns for those who wished to be referred to other than as "she" or "he". Professor Jordan Peterson's criticism of attempts to control the linguistic territory as a totalitarian imposition led to calls for his resignation by hundreds of academics at his own and other institutions. Lost in the fury was a fundamental question that Peterson wanted to address: namely, whether the use of gender pronouns carried with them any presumption of objectivity, or whether they were completely interchangeable, in which case why use gender assignments at all?

The right dismissed this protest as a frivolous capitulation to 'political correctness,' and an unprovoked left-wing attack on an otherwise mild-mannered, non-controversial university professor. As some on the right pointed out, just a year earlier the left had outed, ridiculed, and blacklisted a 'white' woman, Rachel Dolezal, who in their view attempted to 'pass' herself off as black and who claimed, when caught, that she suffered from 'racial dysphoria.' She said she truly believed that despite her original skin color (which, by the time of her 'outing' had been bronzed to perfection) and the European DNA of her parents, she nonetheless 'felt' black in her soul of souls and should therefore be addressed as a black woman. Where, the right wondered, was the left's sense of righteous indignation when it came to defending Rachel's preferred use of pronouns?

The publishing world has been increasingly subject to moral outrage among its staff, which forced publishers to cancel existing deals or avoid making deals with anyone their staff (who are mostly liberals) find abhorrent. The Big Five publishers—Hachette, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, MacMillan, and Penguin Random House—began including "morality" clauses that allowed them to cancel a contract if the personal actions of the author jeopardized book sales. These clauses have

been increasingly invoked in the last few years to justify canceling books. In March 2020, Woody Allen's book deal with Hachette was canceled following criticism by his son Ronan Farrow (also published under Hachette) and employee protest. Simon & Schuster invoked the "morals" clause of its deal with Republican Senator Josh Hawley to cancel his book, *The Tyranny of Big Tech*, within days of the January 6, 2021 breach of the Capitol, citing his role in instigating the insurrection. Kate Hartson, one of the few editors from the Big Five willing to publish right-leaning books, was fired in January (she went on to form a new publisher, All Seasons Press). Staffers at Simon & Schuster petitioned to drop Mike Pence's book, claiming that publishing his book would be "legitimizing bigotry." The right sees the left's dominance of the publishing industry and its use of morality clauses and social disapproval to prevent voices on the right from being heard as an abuse of power and an unfair suppression of their right to free expression.

POLITICIZING SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

While in no way a new tactic since the rise of the #metoo movement, the use of sexual behavior to kneecap an opponent has taken on a new dimension. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, once the darling of the #metoo movement, found himself in its crosshairs for flirtations with Lindsey Boylan, a former aide. His alleged attempts to flatter and impress her, including giving her a rose on Valentine's Day, showing her around his office, and a furtive kiss and allegedly an offhand comment about playing strip poker (in front of another aide and a state trooper), were used to try to bring him down politically. Conveniently, according to the right, Ms. Boylan made the allegations of flirtatious impropriety against him on the same day she launched her candidacy for Manhattan Borough President. The allegations and their timing made some on the right wonder whether this was a politically motivated attack from within his own party in retaliation for invoking the ire of the Democrats by meeting Donald Trump at the White House to ask for federal assistance with New York state infrastructure projects.

Sheila Kelley's Hollywood-based pole dancing studio Factor S remains shuttered after a Hollywood Reporter exposé accusing her of racism and traumatizing her students. Although a less directly political example, it is an incident that the right believes exemplifies how wide-reaching the movement to punish people for failing to comply with extreme (and frankly unrealistic) standards of progressive valor has become and is a teaser for just how chilling the effect of shutting up anyone we don't like is on free speech and expression.

California became the first state to enact "yes means yes" laws that require 'affirmative verbal consent' for consent to be a valid defense against rape in sexual assault cases on campus, introducing,

in the right's view, an astonishing level of paternalistic governance, and tremendous uncertainty into the intimate lives of students. They believe it unfairly transforms the already-difficult terrain of sex among young, college-age males, into an opaque bureaucratic maze with potentially devastating consequences for failing to make the person actively verbalize consent to sex. It also creates unrealistic expectations for young people who are often just discovering their sexuality and potentially criminalizes otherwise innocent, consensual behavior.

Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 was originally enacted to prohibit discrimination based on sex in federally funded educational institutions. What started out as an effort to promote equal opportunities in collegiate sports was drastically transformed, in the right's eyes, when, in the 1990s, courts ruled that sexual harassment creates a barrier to educational opportunities for women that would violate Title IX's prohibition of gender discrimination. This tortured interpretation of the law, the right believed, created a de facto obligation on the part of colleges and universities to investigate cases of sexual misconduct and create what has now become, in essence, an extra-judicial proceeding to judge the guilt or innocence of students accused of sexual 'crimes.' But, because there are no criminal consequences, there are also no due process safeguards in place to protect the rights of the accused. Students are regularly tried and expelled, their reputations and college careers ruined based on flimsy evidence and, what's worse, an inability to confront their accusers—a cornerstone of the American justice system. Worse still, from the right's perspective, this process unfairly places institutions that fail to comply with the draconian and often vague requirements courts have heaped upon Title IX risk losing critical federal funding.

THE GREAT CASUALTY: KILLING LIBERTY IN THE NAME OF INCLUSION

From the right's perspective, the left has become the party 'formerly known as' Peace and Inclusivity. It has morphed into the party of aggressive conformity, driven by a fervent sense of righteous religiosity. The party formerly known for espousing the separation between church and state itself has become a state-sponsored religion. Zealously, the left devoted itself to anti-oppression on behalf of women, people of color, and the climate, at the expense of a foundational pillar of democracy: freedom of expression. To the right, this reeks of fascism. The foundational values of the Enlightenment, liberty, equality, and community—the signifiers of individual freedom—were cast out, the right believed, when the left's priority shifted to protecting 'group' rights.

The left's focus on 'group rights' evolves out of the legal framework of 'suspect classes'—a framework that grew primarily out of voting rights and de jure segregation cases in the 1950s and 1960s. In essence, U.S. courts held the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to prohibit

government discrimination against individuals on the bases of race, color, religion, national origin, or ancestry. Thus, courts would apply ‘strict scrutiny’ (a tighter standard of review granting less discretion to the state) when deciding whether a particular state law unfairly affected ‘classes’ of individuals that had been historically subjected to state-sponsored discrimination—and thus violated their rights under the Fourteenth Amendment.

These ‘suspect classes’—meaning not that individuals within the class were suspected of anything, but that government action that disproportionately affected the group would be deemed ‘suspect’ by courts—evolved over time, in the eyes of the right, into ‘special classes’ of people with special rights not shared by most Americans. Thus, efforts to remedy past (and ongoing) discrimination such as Affirmative Action in higher education and employment came to be viewed by the right as conferring unfair advantages on minority groups who benefited from them. Even worse, the right believes, the fight to advance certain group identities affected the liberty of private parties—for example, to determine who they chose to associate with or what individuals a business chose to hire. The believed discrimination by private individuals was outside the purview of the courts since it does not involve government action. Furthermore, the right believes, the suppression of individual liberties in the name of inclusion infringes on the expression of the individual itself.

The instincts and needs of individuals have often experienced a tense coexistence with the needs of the group, especially in heterogeneous populations with large minorities. Individuals bring their unique experiences and tastes, they sacrifice where needed, they inspire others with what is possible, and the group shares back, benefitting all. Variety and unique perspectives combine in interesting ways to make a culture great. Without such diverse influences, without the new knowledge that individuals bring, a culture can only repeat what already exists. Without genuine individuality, there would be no drive for improvement, no motivation for progress, no reason to change, and society would eventually wither and flatten.

But that is exactly what is under threat, according to the right. Many on the left espouse inclusivity and diversity, but only in the specific and limited ways they define those terms. In the right’s eyes, any genuine disagreement with this ideology is met with utter hostility, public shaming, and threats of violence or social shunning. These are not the methods used by those looking to evolve culture through the contributions of unique individuals. This is not the picture of the American melting pot of the 20th century that the right envisioned.

From the right’s perspective, the left is promoting a sort of secular religiosity typified by virtue signaling, moral posturing, and public shaming. This has tremendous negative effects on people who would dare object. If the threat of punishment from a sacrosanct state religion is so severe, why would anyone want to speak out? Why would anyone want to express their opinion, or remember

they even have one? In a 2020 Cato Institute study, over a third of people feared expressing their true political beliefs to their friends, colleagues and the public.

The sum effect, the right believes, is that people shut down their individual expression to avoid controversy and disapproval. As the Japanese proverb says, “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” Men have become afraid to be men. They are being told their instincts are wrong, misplaced, or are outright dangerous. People are afraid to share their personal opinions lest it destroy their family, their reputations, or career prospects. The entire realm of sexual encounters has become an utter minefield, to be negotiated with a lawyer close at hand.

When people are urged to shut down and ignore their personal feelings and opinions, when individuals curb their behavior to conform to the group, and when they dam up their sexuality, their desire, curiosity, and natural inclinations, they become disconnected from their true identity, the right believes.

The effects are pervasive and progressive. As individuals begin to shut down, society starts withering. Without the shared connection and sense of purpose, and without the celebration and support of our inherently individual experience, we lose genuine meaning. And without that meaning, and with idle time, spare energy and backed-up anger, people tend to resort to tribalism, factionalism, and other divisions that have begun to fracture the social fabric.

So how did progressive values cross a line from protection of minorities to a grave threat to individual liberty and, by extension, to democracy itself? According to the right, the left got religion.

A core tenant of American democracy is the First Amendment to the Constitution, sometimes known as the “Free Exercise” clause, which reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” It was based on the text of the 1786 Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom originally written by Thomas Jefferson which read, “...no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever...nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess...their opinion in matters of religion.” These foundational texts frame America as a place where people are free to practice their religion and are free from subjugation by the religious beliefs of others.

To understand the right’s critique of the left’s religiosity, it is instructive to look at the work of John McWhorter, a black linguistics professor at Columbia University. While race of a professional is not always a relevant issue, in this case it is as important as his or her other credentials. This is because, from the right’s perspective, McWhorter’s critique of ‘third-wave anti-racism’ (the first

being the Abolitionist and the second being the Civil Rights Movement), if presented by a white professor, would likely have cost him his job. In the current culture of cancellation, it's also likely no mainstream publisher would have agreed to publish his forthcoming book on the topic. According to McWhorter, this new wave is "a profoundly religious movement in everything but terminology." Rather than focusing on tangible steps, such as laws that need amending, McWhorter argues that third-wave anti-racism is focused on beliefs that its proponents argue need changing.

Because racism in terms of third-wave theory is framed as an 'intangible' and pervasive presence, it is almost impossible to remedy. If the 'problem' is systemic racism and white privilege, the only thing white people can do is eternally attest to it, like an original sin. There is no way to be rid of it; it is ever present. All a white person can hope to do is acknowledge it and the harm that it causes innocent black people. If whites play their cards right, they might receive social approval, but they can never be truly absolved of their original sin. Thus, the right believes, America can never truly acknowledge the uniqueness of the individual because it is forever being reminded the sin of white group identity.

In the seminal text, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," by Peggy McIntosh, white privilege is defined as the "invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on [the white racial] group from birth." An unsought dominance conferred from birth means that, like original sin, it happened at birth, and with no active participation from the person now carrying it. The only thing in their power to do is penance. Even when doing penance for their racism, the right believes, white people are allegedly still unconsciously racist, as The New York Times is ready to point out. In an article titled, "The Problem with 'Anti-Racist' Movie Lists," author Racquel Gates takes umbrage at articles with titles like "Concerned About Racism? Here are 19 Anti-Racist Movies and TV Shows You Can Stream Right Now," presumably written for white people interested in learning about and checking their privilege, because in doing so they merely continue to prioritize white people's perspectives.

When it comes to opinions, McWhorter says that "problematic" is now equivalent to "blasphemous." The film industry has responded with Disney issuing content warnings on seven of their films, including Dumbo (1941), The Jungle Book (1967), and Aladdin (1992). Before the show comes on, viewers see the following message: "This program includes negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together. Disney is committed to creating stories with inspirational and aspirational themes that reflect the rich diversity of the human experience around the globe." Racist blasphemy, according to the right, is now the scourge all businesses are striving to eradicate.

And rather than excommunication of people like Galileo, who blasphemously questioned the Church's doctrine that the sun revolved around the earth, now we are excommunicating people like Bon Appétit editor-in-chief Adam Rapoport for dressing up as a Puerto Rican while holding Madonna, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Alia Shawkat to account for using the N-word.

Central to McWhorter's thesis that anti-racism is a religion is the tendency of its proponents to hide behind the assertion that the issue is too "complex" to be understood, thus dismissing critiques of the doctrine's coherency. Take, for example, Dr. Neal Lester: When asked by CNN to explain why black people can use the N-word but white people cannot, he said, "I don't want to dismiss the question, what I'm saying is, that question is so loaded with nuisance that it is actually more about the person asking the question than it is about the question."

From the right's perspective then, if our Constitution strictly protects an individual's freedom to believe or not believe (and from the people who would try to force us otherwise), this protection should be extended to the new religion of anti-racism. Furthermore, if efforts to achieve social justice are to be successful while protecting individual liberties, they must, in the words of Dr. McWhorter, "proceed minus the religious aspect they have taken on."

IV. SAME ILLNESS, DIFFERENT SYMPTOMS

What we can notice, when we loosen our self-obsessions and soften our revulsion for the other side, is that we both, right and left, suffer from the same illness. While the illness is the same, it may present differently depending upon one's orientation. On the right, the illness may present as a sudden eruption, like a heart attack or stroke. On the left, it can present as a gradually metastasizing tumor that creeps slowly and invisibly until it absorbs all the healthy cells around it. The right fears being absorbed by left-wing socialists, and the left fears the violent overthrow of our democracy by right-wing despots.

POLITICS AND PSYCHOLOGY: THE DANCE OF IDENTITY

In the dialectic of polarization, there are two primary expressions of power—hard power and soft power. We can think of hard power as masculine: a driven, goal-oriented, pushing kind of force. It separates, divides, and compartmentalizes. It is decisive, action-oriented, is aggressive, and imposes structure by force of will. Soft power could be thought of as feminine. It operates in connection; it has gravity; it draws in. It emanates rather than restricts and is relationship-based. It is fluid rather than rigid and static.

Joseph Nye introduced the notion of 'soft power' in his 1990 book, *Bound to Lead*. He contrasted soft power with the hard power of coercive international political relations that rely on the use of or threat of military force. Soft power, by contrast, operates by attraction, absorption, and co-option. It attempts to convince others based on an appeal to a set of shared ideals and values.

However, as academics like Janice Bially Mattern have argued, soft power is not quite as soft as it is often perceived to be. The notion of attraction, the key basis for distinguishing it from coercive hard power, when closely examined, often turns out to be yet another form of coercion. This is evident in the Bush administration's response to the 9/11 attacks. States were asked to join a "war on terror" and were given the choice to be "either with us or with the terrorists". Although no state was specifically threatened with military action if it failed to provide the requested assistance, the "attraction" is revealed for what it is: forcing an actor to choose sides, to either reinforce soft power's narrative of itself as the "good guys" or risk being cast as "evil" themselves, and with the terrorists. Soft power threatens its subject's sense of self instead of attracting it through logic and persuasion. Side-stepping this narrative of 'good vs. evil' and 'with us vs. against us,' and perhaps choosing non-alignment, is simply not an option, particularly because of the presence of an unstated threat.

Political discourse is therefore deeply tied to our evolutionary biology in terms of how we make up our sense of self. One of the most effective strategies of soft power is to craft a narrative of a positive self-image of your own group (e.g., caring, safe, compassionate, humane), and to add power to it by painting the ‘others’ as the opposite (callous, selfish, dangerous, inhumane). By casting the others in a negative light, soft power draws those sitting on the fence into decision, by creating a fear of the loss of moral agency to lay claim to those virtues.

This ‘with us or against us’ mentality, playing on how people formed their identity, was precisely how the Nazis operated using their ideas of harmony and order to create a culture of fear and terror based on racial segregation and hierarchy, which ultimately resulted in the industrialized mass extermination of people who found themselves in the “against us” camp. The Nazis’ principal values were harmony, first with nature, and then with the racialized notion of the “volk.” Protecting the purity of the ‘volk’ justified the Nazi’s encroachment on civil liberties. As Jonathan Goldberg illustrates in *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left*, the Nazi party believed in free health care and guaranteed jobs. They confiscated private wealth and invested heavily in public education. They were pioneers in organic farming and alternative medicine. Hitler was vegetarian and Himmler an animal rights activist. Arguments like Goldberg’s, linking the ideas of Hitler’s ideals of racial purity, with creeping socialism that promises salvation but delivers us into the jaws of hell, are dismissed by the left as a reductionist “gotcha”. But this is to miss the point most salient to our current time: that the propagation of a genuinely held value, when the method of persuasion is ‘with us or we will wipe you out, socially and economically,’ eventually leads to totalitarianism. The Nazis were motivated primarily by ideals of harmony, primarily expressed through a focus on order and cleanliness. That is why one of their first initiatives on taking power was to clean up German factories, using the same chemical, Zyklon B, that would later be used to exterminate Jews in the Holocaust’s gas chambers. Their quest for harmony was backed by religious political fervor to stamp out anything they view as standing in the way of harmony. Taking on this messianic tenor, the Nazi Party wielded the “either with us or with x” cudgel of soft power to coerce Germany’s leading industrialists into supporting their political agenda. It is the same overarching concern for harmony, order, and conformity that justifies the “either with us or with x” coercive power of America’s political left; the x’s in this case being ‘racist, sexist, transphobic’ and so on.

Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmitt captured the essence of fascist policy in his concept of the “state of exception.” By focusing on the idea of exceptional circumstances, manufacturing public conviction that the situation is a crisis and then converting that state of exception into an ongoing emergency, the public can be convinced to give up their freedom—and assenting to incredible cruelty to the ‘other’—to satisfy their perceived need for protection from a crisis that the Nazis alone could provide them. Since Trump’s election in 2016, these are exactly the tactics employed by Democratic

politicians and mainstream media, who have utilized every technique up to and including outright censorship on social media platforms. They argue that the exceptional risk that the former President posed to national security justified suspending the values and principles of democracy, not least of which is the First Amendment.

The principle of freedom of expression is essential to a free society, as expressed by Enlightenment Philosopher Voltaire who famously declared, “I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” This sentiment was echoed more recently in 1963 by African American lawyer and civil rights activist Pauli Murray who insisted that Alabama Governor George Wallace, famous for his slogan “Segregation Forever,” should be allowed to speak at Yale. While a doctoral student at Yale Law School she wrote a letter to then-university president Kingman Webster (who had urged students on The Yale Political Union debate team to rescind their invitation) to permit Wallace to speak. “This controversy affects me in a dual sense,” Murray wrote, “for I am both a lawyer committed to civil rights including civil liberties and a Negro who has suffered from the evils of racial segregation.” Murray, who had organized protests, sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, and even the historic March on Washington in that very year, viewed *de jure* segregation as “a monster, dividing peoples, thwarting personalities, breeding civil wars.” However, she nonetheless believed that Yale should not infringe upon Wallace’s “constitutional right” to free expression. “I would be among the first to picket [Wallace’s speech],” she noted, implying that she would make her voice heard in opposition to Wallace, but would firmly defend his right to speak.

She believed that the freedom of speech rights that blacks had fought for so hard must be extended equally to everyone, even people who would challenge her rights to the same. Unfortunately, this rigorous commitment to free speech is slipping, as clearly evidenced from Twitter’s permanent ban of Trump from the platform ostensibly for his ‘glorification of violence.’

CHINA’S SOFT POWER REVOLUTION

China’s government has operated based on soft power on the world stage. While it offers rewards for being in its good graces, it tolerates no deviation or criticism from within.

By the early 2000s, the Chinese economy had recovered some ground from the devastation of the Cultural Revolution. Growing at an average rate of 9.5% every year since 1979, it was clear China was rising economically. But the question on everyone’s mind in the West was: What kind of ambition would China have on the world stage, and what form would its power take? With the fall of Soviet Russia only the Christmas before, 1992 marked the first year America was the sole global superpower—a period which lasted for over a decade. Was a newly prosperous China going

to be a threat to the Pax Americana? China's Premier Wen Jiabao addressed these questions at a 2003 address at Harvard where he signaled the launch "China's Peaceful Rise" strategy of global engagement. Throughout the speech he heavily emphasized China's historic ideals of peacefulness as well as promising that China's future development depended upon and would foster world peace.

This concept has been the guiding star of China's soft power policy for almost twenty years. Rather than using brute force, China prefers to woo its allies with strategic gifts. In 2009, China surpassed America as Africa's largest trading partner. But in 2011 China made another milestone, when its loans to the continent outstripped U.S. aid. As of 2019, African public sector borrowers have taken \$153 billion in debt—primarily for infrastructure development. China finances one in five African infrastructure projects and constructs one in three. This has made China a key ally in Africa. China has also become famous for its "panda diplomacy,"—gifting pairs of giant pandas to countries, from earnest displays of willingness (arguably in the case of the pandas gifted to the U.S. after Nixon's first visit to China in 1972) to rewards for loyalty (Finland received their pandas in 2018 after endorsing the One-China policy, turning away from Taiwan).

Not limited to gifts, China is extending its influence through the purchase of strategic assets. By 2018, Chinese state-owned enterprises controlled 10% of European shipping port capacity, up from less than 1% eight short years before in 2010. Since 2004 when China launched its "go global" strategy, education has also been another targeted sector. There are currently 541 "Confucius Institutes" in colleges and universities around the world, and 2,000 Confucius classrooms where Chinese language and culture is taught, all funded by the Chinese government. Chinese companies bought 17 UK private schools and upwards of four U.S. colleges in recent years.

Telecommunications is also a key sector—with telecom Huawei producing more phones globally than Apple, second only to Samsung. So concerned was America in the potential for this communications network being used for Chinese surveillance that it started targeted bans against Huawei in 2012, progressively ramping up to full sanctions in 2020 to freeze the spread.

While all these initiatives may seem benign, even benevolent, when taken together the overwhelming influence amassed by these billion-dollar investments cannot be underestimated. These investments represent subtle, and not so subtle demands and control of behavior and policy. There may not be any obvious casualties yet, but they charge in conformity. Silent support, or cursory criticism, of China's human rights violations in Xinjiang province and democracy crackdowns in Hong Kong, to name a few, are examples of the coercive capacity built into soft power. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of Muslim Uighur people, native to the most Western Chinese province, are undergoing cultural genocide, being detained in "vocational skill education training centers" to

“carry out anti-extremist ideological education” in efforts to enforce patriotism and quell dissent.

RUSSIA’S MACHISMO

By contrast to China, Russia is the perfect example of “hard power.” With its willingness to use military might to make a point and even expand its territory, Russia is boldly employing a hard power strategy to assert its agenda on the global stage. In February 2014, masked and unmarked gunmen entered the Crimea, surrounding airports, occupying the parliament building and raising a Russian flag. At first, Russia denied that the troops were theirs but after voice and data links between Crimea and Ukraine were severed, and a new pro-Russia prime minister of the region was installed, Russia finally acknowledged they had moved troops into the region. In March the Crimean parliament voted to secede from Ukraine, which was confirmed by a referendum, whereby Crimea became part of the Russian Federation. All these events were called ‘illegitimate’ by the Wests. In March 2021 NATO jets scrambled to respond to an unusually high number of Russian fighter and bomber flights near allied airspace in Eastern Europe, followed not long after by three nuclear-armed Russian submarines which shot missiles in a training drill in the Arctic. Even now, the UK and Russia disagree on ownership of Crimean waters, with warning shots fired over the issue as recently as June 2021. Russia uses its military not only to make a point, but to carry out its foreign policy objectives. Force is not the threat, it’s the strategy.

CHINA AND RUSSIA REVEAL OUR POLARIZED RELATIONSHIP WITH POWER

China and Russia present interesting reflections of America’s relationship to hard and soft power. Because the American left has polarized so far toward the feminine—with its emphasis on consensus, care-taking, and systemic rather than direct power—it fears Russia and its willingness to overtly employ hard power in foreign policy. In contrast, the American right has become hypermasculine, with its overtly aggressive, nationalistic, protectionist and self-determinist attitudes. As a result, it fears China and its expanding sphere of influence. The left and the right are united only by their shared paranoia, seeing their respective enemies everywhere. The Democrats are sure that Russia rigged the 2016 election and tampered in the 2020 election and the Republicans are adamant that China’s handling of, and potentially even creation of, the COVID-19 epidemic should have criminal consequences. This has left both sides too paralyzed to address real versus imagined threats.

V. REACTIONARY RESPONSE TO THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY DRIFT

If the left genuinely wants to understand how Trump won, it must take note of the fact that his entire platform was based on opposing the ‘soft power’ strategy employed by the liberal party that seeks the eradication of individual freedom in supposed service to group equality. This movement from the party that espouses liberal ideals is decidedly un-democratic. This leveling of the individual, where unique and differing viewpoints are attacked as hate speech, where jobs are handed out based on the group’s idea of equity rather than merit, and therefore, according to the right, a decidedly socialist or communist approach.

For example, Lin-Manuel Miranda, the creative genius famous for casting all people of color actors in *Hamilton*, a musical about the all-white founding fathers of America, came under fire in June 2021 for casting decisions in a film about modern life in the “Heights”—an Upper Manhattan neighborhood. Critics said that while actors were Latinx and Afro-Latinx, they weren’t dark skinned enough to adequately represent the ethnic makeup of the community, so much so that Miranda issued an apology for the ‘colorism’ or his ‘extractive’ work. In a subsequent interview with *The New York Times*, the director of the film Jon Chu said that the topic had been discussed but “in the end, when we were looking at the cast, we tried to get the people who were best for those roles.” The pressure to hire based on group identity rather than talent or right fit is getting louder, even in intentionally representative media.

The perceived bleeding over of forced ‘diversity’ into almost every aspect of American life under the guise of democracy is precisely what makes it so threatening to those on the right who see liberty as a core democratic value. Unlike the right, who have learned from past mistakes how to guard against the tendency to take the quest for ideological supremacy to extremes, the left has not yet learned that lesson. It is careening toward a reckoning with its own ideological extremism. No one starts out trying to cause harm, and yet that’s where we are ending up. At what point will limits on speech, or forced equity in the workplace set off enough alarms? What will cause us to pay attention?

To the non-partisan observer, Donald Trump’s ascendancy as the 45th President of the United States can be seen as an extreme correction of this “bleed,” a reactive blowback that, at bottom, aims to protect democracy by reducing us to our lowest common denominator. Is the agenda of Trump of a higher order? Is it the best of what America has to offer? Is it a true representation of America?

No. Decidedly not. Was it necessary? Quite possibly.

This rationale for Trump's rise is totally inconceivable to the left. From the right's perspective, the left was so oblivious to the chaos it has produced—the absurd gender-bending, racial myopia, and over-policing of individuals' speech and sexual behavior—that it has been gutted of any grounded sense of purpose, any guiding narrative, or any sense of 'truth.' In the right's eyes, the left has been eviscerated by postmodernist nihilism—where there are no moral absolutes, and the truth changes according to the whims of the beholder. To the right, the left looks as if it has lost its collective mind. Many of them would rather have Trump 'grab 'em by the pussy'—at least that's a familiar offense—than to be coerced into endorsing the 'farce' that a man (who is not even an athlete) is going to be declared Sports Illustrated's 'Sportswoman of the Year.' This type of casual defiance of credulity on the part of the left strikes terror in the hearts of those on the right and prompts them to endorse extreme measures (including declaring martial law) to return, in their view, a semblance of decency and normalcy to American life.

The progressive movement's aim to take down historical monuments, to erase collective history (the good, the bad and the ugly) seem to the right like an effort to take down the white male, to take down white culture, to take down America herself. However, in the right's view, attempting to obliterate ugly parts of our history also defaces American greatness: when you erase history, you also remove the ties that unite us as a nation. It begs the question: Must we remove the monuments to Thomas Jefferson to build a memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? After all, they are both an indelible part of what makes us unique as a nation. Perhaps those on the left should resist the tendency to view the contributions of historical figures through the lens of today's politics—lest future generations judge our own contributions in such a manner and attempt to deface our contributions to a shared legacy of progress, transformation, and greatness.

No one is happier about these internecine wars than our foreign adversaries. From their perspective, the left, by exacerbating societal divisions and reopening old wounds, was doing the heavy lifting of weakening America for them.

THE BASEMENT SALE OF CORE DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Because our body politics sensed a growing threat from within, it reacted alarm in the form of nationalism, the tribalism, and ethnocentricity that ultimately resulted in Trump's ascension to the Presidency. His words acted as a primitive and crude immune system for an America weakened and sickened by the fracturing this new ethos had brought about. I am not endorsing the subjugation of anyone, just as I would not praise a skin rash on a loved-one's face. I simply do not see Trump's

arrival on the scene as an anomaly. I see it as the signifier of a deep-seated resentment and terror on the part of a population that proved to be the silent majority. There could not have been a Trump without the underlying tension that gave rise to him. If he brought nothing else of value, he alerted the nation to something far more dangerous than the left will acknowledge—the exclusion of 50 percent of the population.

To which the left might respond, “Good! Now they see how it feels. They should be excluded because they are racist and sexist and should have a taste of their own medicine.” Perhaps this would be worth it—even if it goes against the love, tolerance, and inclusion that the left is built on—if it would genuinely balance inequity. But it won’t.

Where it goes off the rails for those on the right is where this exclusion of voices in the name of equality takes place at the expense of the founding values of the country—when free speech, the rights of the individual and free thought are subjugated to group rights. The movement was beginning to smell a lot like fascism where fascists reject individual rights (in the case of Hitler over the Volk) encourage divisiveness and expand the power of the state, for example, attempted not only to control state power but also to dominate institutions and organizations that were previously independent of the state, such as courts, churches, universities, social clubs, veterans’ groups, sports associations, and youth groups. This is where you see the blowback against big tech, the media and the elites that are seen by the right as the state agenda. A December 2018 survey conducted by an outlet of The Hill—centrist, Washington-insider publication—found that people born in the mid-1990s and early 2000s were the only age group of Americans that believed social media companies were not biased against conservatives.

REDISCOVERING THE HIGH ROAD

It’s an adage that those who fail to learn from the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them. We have already discussed some of the factors giving rise to Trump’s ascendancy. However, the left seems hell-bent on repeating some of those mistakes by continuing to write-off almost half the country as some sort of ‘fringe’ group of extreme haters. However, while it may lessen the satisfaction with an election win over Trump, some introspection is warranted on the left, because failing to do so makes us susceptible to the rise of another Trump Presidency or perhaps something far —worse armed civil conflict on American soil.

As we as a nation make voodoo dolls of Donald Trump, we tend to ascribe all too much significance to his ‘avatar’ and fail to understand the strains of American aspiration and resentment that give

rise to people like him. Trump is just the public effigy erected by a group of Americans fueled by resentment and frustration. We can call them ignorant; we can take down their leader, we can employ the coercive force of soft power to suppress their ambitions. Such efforts will only suffice to drive such movements underground where they will fester and grow, and ultimately return stronger, more vengeful, and more dangerous.

It seems that aside from continuing to try to take Trump and his supporters down, the left has no agenda of its own. Its self-conception is defined by its opposition to the other. I would suggest that the left, and the country, abandon the politics of polarization and adopt a path living up to our highest values, and invite everyone to the party—including those with whom we may disagree.

I supported Barack Obama because I saw in him an embodiment of our highest values. As a person and a politician, he is thoughtful, caring, inclusive, funny and a true original. What was so powerful was that he was a black president, who became president, not because he was black, but because he was the best we had to choose from. He was president because he was brilliant and caring. I recognize that, though he was great at inspiring and campaigning, he was not as effective at implementing the vision he set forth. I recognize his shortcomings, but I believe his contributions—both in action and temperament—so outweighed his deficits, that I am willing to forgive him a few things. A missed opportunity.

Obama made a grave and somewhat fatal error, and it was not while he was in office. His mistake was in not coming out sooner and with greater passion to translate to the nation what was happening in our descent into fractured polarization, as only he could do. Had he come out and said, “We need to wake up,” and explained that our collective hubris—the arrogance of the establishment and our identity politics swagger—led us into this mess, and that we needed to transform that energy into consciously building a more perfect union, rather than a more expansive state, he would have allayed the concerns of the right who got scared into voting for Trump because they feared the encroachment of the left. I know of no one who had the moral authority, the objectivity, or the power to steer us back to sanity other than him. There was no one else on the political stage who had formed a political platform that stood for a grand American vision, rather than in opposition to the other side. But he did not speak out, and we did not heed the warning. And this is the swamp we now swim in with our endless picket signs that litter the streets today. The left became what my friend Sarah calls the “door-slammy adolescent party.” It lost its sense of nobility and sank into partisan rancor.

The only other person who was willing to breathe some sanity into the conversation by addressing the humanity of all, including Trump voters, was Van Jones. He was eviscerated in the media for befriending Jared Kushner in a bipartisan effort to change incarceration in the United States and for

a series in which he sat down with Trump voters and talked to them like human beings. For this, he paid dearly, and before long, he fell back in line with the ‘with us/against us’ left and deviated no further.

What have we become when we, the party of love and tolerance, issue ultimatums to our own to keep each other in line and hurl insults and bully people within our own party the way North Koreans might? There is no greater disappointment than watching the people who are here to hold the deepest values under duress become the cruelty they claim they want to eliminate. What would have made us into a great diamond instead left us dark as coal.

CHASING THE GREAT PROMISE OF THE WHITE MIDDLE CLASS

And this leads me to ask, what is the fever-pitch demand for everyone to conform to the progressive agenda really seeking? It seems to me that the last great promise of liberals to vulnerable groups, people of color, LGBTQ+, women, is entry into the great mainstream of American culture: the middle class. Rather than casting the middle class as what it is—the conversion therapy for diverse populations with the aim of homogenization and sterilization—it is presented as the great boon of progress. The rise of women to positions of power did not elevate the distinct power of the feminine. Rather it demanded women don ‘pantsuits’ and be more like men. To enter mainstream channels, blacks had to straighten their hair and lose their distinct accents and manners of speech. The price of progress was the loss of unique self-expression and total assimilation into an amorphous ‘whiteness.’ What we as a nation hold out as a promise signifying equality is instead a deal with the devil—sell your unique soul in exchange for the almighty dollar. This is the metal monkey liberals have their constituency chasing after.

In the relentless process of social and cultural assimilation, women are asked to act like men, moving from the curve of the feminine form and emotional intelligence into the rigid, linear and assertive male frame. They abdicate their feminine power—intuition, nuance, empathy, and nurturing—into a world that sees only corners and lines.

The same is true with respect to black culture. In an insightful statement about funk diva Alice Davis, Miles Davis’ ex-wife, the narrator said that as gifted and brilliant as she was, she did not make it to the level of The Supremes or The Temptations because she was too funky, too black, she refused to leave her blackness behind in a time of civil rights when the call to ‘cross-over’ to mainstream culture became the fashion. The black man agrees to effectively castrate himself, to play the role of the court eunuch to avoid threatening white culture Dave Chappelle has noted the way

that every black male actor is at some point invited to don a dress as part of a comedy scene in a film to become effeminate enough to signal he is willing to be controlled—before being allowed into the Hollywood mainstream. The same can be said for other people of color, from Latin Americans so steeped in sensuality, to Italian immigrants. The order is to tame us into domesticated animals and conceal whatever parts of ourselves do not conform to the dominant culture.

And then there is the LGBTQ+ community who has so passionately fought to eradicate the wild in their nature that they may be permitted into the reserve that is middle class America. Abandoning a culture on the margins that expanded the center for all of us, a culture of sexual liberation, of exploration around gender and relationship style, one would think that the Republican National Convention designed the LGBTQ+ lifestyle, now centered in America's suburbs, saddled with their institutionalized relationship of husband or wife and white-washed khaki wearing careers.

The great promise of liberals is that you too can become a white man. You too can erase what makes you unique and beautiful. You too can sound like the former nightly newscasters with their Broadcast English (I say former as our newscasters today sound like telenovela characters weeping on cue). This equality at the expense of uniqueness is no equality but a homogenization. It is the opposite of the experiment the United States was aimed to be, the great pot of many unique flavors. Instead, we have opted for a new American palate, nothing too spicy, too salty, too flavorful. A single watered-down stew that people are climbing over each other to get into.

DON'T ASK ANY QUESTIONS

If we dare question whether melting into a bland rue is what we really want, and if we dare to notice the slow erosion into cultural socialism, we are branded as 'Trumpist' or worse—Nazis. Among those born in the 1930s, 75 percent of Americans define living under a democratic government as essential. Among people born in the 1980s, that number drops to the low 30s. We who believe in the cornerstones of democracy should be terrified when we hear that only 32 percent of millennials consider it "absolutely essential" that "civil rights protect people's liberty." Forty percent of 18- to 34-year-olds are willing to forego free speech, the qualifying character of true democracy, if it is deemed offensive. We are literally throwing our rights into the great homogenized pot.

Trump succeeded in getting elected because he gave voice to the visceral fear in the hearts of Americans that we were abandoning the First Amendment. Rather than stopping here, we must move beyond our own reactivity to dissect how he did what he did. If we did, we could break the spell so many fell under. Trump understood that Americans were being attacked at the core of the American identity, the right to individualism, of free speech and free thought and played that card

as the bad boy who would not be quieted. His vulgar, rude, inappropriate persona not only knocked out the dilettante elite, but it spoke to something deeper in the American heart. It said symbolically, “I will be one who will not be homogenized. I will represent those who will not march like sheep into the great socialist agenda.” You can bristle over the “grab her by the pussy” comment, and bristle we did, so much so that we took ourselves right out of the game. Or you can dissect his every move and come to understand exactly what he was speaking to and speak to that exact same fear in the human heart with the skill and compassion that the Democratic Party prides itself on.

There are many people who are not interested in a whitewashed America, and who are not willing to forego their individual rights in supposed service of the collective. They are not ignorant, racist, sexist ‘deplorables’ who beat their wives and give the snake eye to blacks walking into the diner. That we have cast them as such is a testament to the hubris of the white liberal agenda. It is small-minded and insulting and it is a fatal error. It places the intelligent person, unwilling to forego either equality or liberty, in the difficult position of choosing. What Trump got right was that he did not demand a choice, whereas the Democrats did. And what an extreme hazing it was, with censorship in universities, media, the threat of being canceled. To the coastal liberal this is not a big deal. To the individual who loves this country because people were willing to die for our right to free speech and free thought, it is not only abhorrent but intolerable.

What Democrats refuse to see is that when you point one finger three fingers point back at you. In 1997, Steve Jobs articulated what this country is about for so many when he said:

“Here’s to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes... the ones who see things differently — they’re not fond of rules... You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can’t do is ignore them because they change things... they push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.”

John Stuart Mill’s words in *On Liberty* ring as true today as when he wrote them in 1859:

“Persons of genius, it is true, are, and are always likely to be, a small minority; but in order to have them, it is necessary to preserve the soil in which they grow. Genius can only breathe freely in an atmosphere of freedom. Persons of genius are, *ex vi termini* [by definition], more individual than any other people—less capable, consequently, of fitting themselves, without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character.”

This sentiment is what makes America, with its pioneering spirit, so great. There is a class of folks who exist entirely outside the “Trumpers” or the “never Trumpers.” They refused to be indoctrinated into either cult-like belief system. This group saw people being silenced, threatened, and in some cases imprisoned. Freedom became a crime, and one need only go through someone’s Facebook or Twitter feed to see where they committed the crime of free expression now seen as dangerous by the offense police of ‘non-offense’ groupthink.

From the right’s perspective the left-wing media practiced the sleight of hand tactics of laying the blame on Trump, while leftists in government gradually encroached on civil liberties by changing laws and institutional rules. As Bret Weinstein, the Evergreen College professor who was ejected for coming to work on a day where student organizers told the whites to stay away from campus as a gesture to ‘safe spaces’ for students of color, summarized so concisely, “The population is made up of four types of people: A small number who hunt witches. A large number who go along with the hunt. A larger number who are silent. A tiny number oppose it. The final group—as if by magic—become witches.”

Fox News and the right-wing media, on the other hand, aren’t out to fool anyone—that is to say, it does not pretend to be anything other than what it is. They are wolves in wolves clothing. What is scary from the right’s perspective is, when cloaked in the sheepish garb of doing ‘social good’ and hidden in the fine print of protecting group rights, the progressive elimination of civil liberties, heats up the pot so slowly that we fail to realize we’re already cooked. How did they do it? They simply used a well-worn parlor trick. They made Trump into the pocket watch they swung back and forth to hypnotize the masses. And he was, ironically, so willing to play the part that it worked.

But if you pay attention to the person holding the watch and not the watch itself, a different story emerges. If you don’t place your sole focus on Trump and his antics, you are accused of supporting the destruction of western democracy, and the subjugation of blacks and women. All while the left actually destroys diversity and works to eliminate not only unique feminine or black culture, but the entire concept of gender itself. Woke culture repeats “you are getting very sleepy” as we collectively take a nap and the moving men come in to remove our constitutional amendments and replace them with cheap social media created replicas. The ‘for us/against us’ agenda is devastatingly effective at achieving compliance and near total capitulation to the left’s ideological supremacy.

MAULED BY A MILLION SHEEP

So here we are, like cats obsessed with a laser beam, moving maniacally around the wall, missing everything else happening in the room. We are the cats, bobbing our heads up and down, and

Trump is the circling red dot.

The left's presupposition seems to be that if someone is not hellbent on destroying Trump and all that he stands for, they're ill-informed, ignorant to historical precedent and, if not overtly colluding with white supremacy, then guilty of not opposing it enough. It is positively incomprehensible to these folks, the right believes, that a well-read, well-informed, intelligent person might see Trump, not as the next Hitler or Stalin, but as a human being made consequential, not by his power, but by the histrionics and reactivity of this opponents. He looms far larger in our collective imagination than he appears in the rear-view mirror of recent history.

We gave Trump the script, with our paranoid forecasts and alarmist prevarications. Trump, who is by nature a skillful and intuitive provocateur, took the script and ran with it. One need only turn on CNN to hear liberals giving Trump the recipe for our disaster. "He will not leave office," Bill Maher declared. 'Duly noted,' Trump thought, as he acted on cue. "If I want to drive them to distraction, do not leave office." It is a performance artist correlate, the Elvis of provocateurs bringing liberals to their knees. Milo Yiannopoulos said, "You all fall for it too easily."

Rather than ask why we lost our center so easily, why we were willing to lose our own moral compass and become the hate we were accusing Republicans of exhibiting, we simply asserted lament more loudly, like yelling at someone in a foreign language. Obviously, anyone who did not ascribe to the anti-capitalist, anti-male, anti-white, anti-woman (because they wanted gender as a category), anti-free-speech agenda became the victim of slurs and outright condescension. Intelligent people stopped speaking when any form of dissent of ideas meant that you were now considered a white supremacist. And while people like myself may not have voted for Trump, it looked to some of us that we were facing the stark choice of either being mauled by a million stampeding sheep or facing down one very bad wolf.

POPULISM RIGHT AND LEFT

Trump is a populist by temperament. That is, he advocates for the overthrow of the establishment without fully explaining what will replace it. He promised to end Obamacare, for example, but never got around to creating a replacement. Populist movements purport to speak for "the people" hard done by the establishment and the political elite. For populist leaders, "the people" turns out not to be everyone, but a select group receptive to their message. In a study by Yascha Mounk and Jordan Kyle in *The Atlantic*, two fundamental claims were the defining characteristics of populist governments: "elites and 'outsiders' work against the interests of the 'true people,' and (2) since

populists are the voice of the ‘true people,’ nothing should stand in their way’.

Populist movements are also marked by an appeal to emotion over reason and facts. The fuel is always resentment. It feeds on complementary primitive human instincts: the sense of having been left out and not being heard or having a voice in the conversation, and the sense of an external threat to the tribe that must be forcefully dealt with. This plays right into the hands of the leader who can both be that voice and fight off that threat. Being a populist gives you carte blanche to dismiss everyone not in your camp. As Jan-Werner Müller noted, UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage describing Britain’s vote to leave the European Union as a “victory for real people” implies that almost half of the British people were not “real people.”

Populist ideas need an environment of fear and mistrust to take hold. They cannot and do not take hold when a society is healthy. There may be fear-mongering orators out there, but without a breeding ground for it, they will not find their audience and their movement. We are entering a time where respect for democracy, liberty, and free speech are at alarmingly low levels, especially amongst young people, making this an especially propitious time for populist fear-based politics to take hold.

You might say in response, “We know, and this is exactly why it is imperative that Trump is not re-elected.” But populism is dangerous whether it comes from the right or the left. The answer is not to swing from Trump’s to Sanders’ populism, whose targets include the financial elite, billionaires, and executives (including Trump himself) and anyone perceived to stand against securing greater group rights for the poor and minorities. The solution to polarizing populism is not the predictable hard swing in the opposite direction, which is equally damaging. While we may argue about who is more populist (a contest that Trump would likely win), the key distinguishing point here is that Sanders represents the wing of the Democratic Party that would prefer not to have to listen to the other half of the country, and that is precisely our dilemma.

We must find ways to include everyone in the conversation. We would do well to remember that democracy and freedom of expression do not come naturally for the human species; we are biologically wired to oppose speech and viewpoints we find abhorrent. We want to be right and eliminate all dissent. However, we should learn to re-interpret that ‘fingers-on-chalkboard’ feeling as a signal that we need to engage people on the other side with mutual respect, because the contest of ideas results in a distillation of viewpoints that ultimately makes us stronger and better adapted to the world in which we live. When we fail to engage, we merely submerge further into the swamp of fear of resentment that both caused and fueled Trump’s rise—and the vicious cycle of mutual fear and mistrust continues.

