

Earth Manifesto



Democracy, and the Problematic and Pathological Perils of "Electoral Autocracies"

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Many insightful observations are made in this essay to show how and why authoritarian regimes cause much harm and pose such danger to people and their freedoms and well-being around the world. The situation is evaluated in particular with regard to Hungary, Turkey, India, Poland, Russia and the U.S.

An autocracy is a system of government in a country that is characterized by domineering rule or control exerted by one person (and a small power-abusing group) that wields overwhelming power. Autocratic regimes generally engage in crony capitalism, favoring friends and discriminating against "enemies". Such crony capitalism is good for favored corporations, and for those who make it easy for them to rig the economy in ways mainly beneficial to top management, big shareholders and the conspicuously already rich. But this strategy comes with severe ramifications and far-reaching impacts, and excessively high costs to the vast majority of the people.

In many countries ruled by authoritarian leaders, the people are governed in what experts call an "electoral autocracy". This is a hybrid type of regime in which democratic institutions govern using authoritarian methods. In governments like this, regular elections are held, but they generally fail to abide by adequate democratic standards of fairness or to assure people's freedoms.

Hybrid regimes of electoral autocracies are authoritarian systems governed by a constitution that have a façade of institutional democracy, yet do not respect reasonable democratic norms and standards.

The reasons that leaders impose an electoral autocracy are obvious. The more oppressive, destructive, self-serving and incompetent a leader is, the more repression, censorship, disinformation and election tricks are required to stay in office, and the more obstacles must be created by strong men rulers to prevent them from being held accountable. Such strategies helped Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán get re-elected in April 2022, and it also helped Recep Erdogan get re-elected in Turkey in May 2023, despite the many authoritarian dictates and failings of his administration.

Influence peddling has become a dominant corrupting activity in the USA today. Politicians sell influence to megadonors, allowing Big Money to insidiously subvert our democracy. This makes our government a corporatocratic plutocracy, ruled by wealthy people under the malign influence of scheming profit-prepossessed CEOs and investors that seek to gain for themselves at the tragic social cost of undermining *The Common Good, Properly Understood*.

Schemes that pander to Big Money and Dark Money donors are grotesque perversions of propriety and constitutional fairness, and violate common sense concepts of integrity in our elections and governance. Super PACS represent an abuse of "free speech" rights, because they overwhelm the First Amendment freedom of speech rights guaranteed to all citizens in the Bill of Rights, drastically diminishing them.

Advocating for Healthy Democracies against Autocracies

A healthy democracy is vastly better for people in ensuring their freedoms, security and general welfare than an autocracy. But since the health of democracies is undermined and constantly threatened by those who pursue dominating power and special privileges and big profits at the expense of the people, we need to understand what

makes a democracy healthy and how best to keep it in good order.

To be healthy, a democracy should be open, just and resilient in the face of change, and worthy of people's trust. It should give fair representation to all citizens, respecting and protecting the dignity and equal rights of each individual. "A just system," according to the Democracy Fund, "must make the right to vote paramount, remove structural barriers to equitable participation, and expose undue influence." To accomplish these goals, "power must be held to account by checks and balances, the rule of law, independent journalism, and a robust civil society that is able to flourish in a vibrant public square."

The checks and balances in a healthy democracy must feature a fair judiciary, along with constitutional limits on the executive and congressional branches to prevent abuses of power. "Finally, leaders in a healthy democracy must act with integrity and engage in principled compromise that respects facts and pursues the common good." *MAGA* Republicans are obviously terrible at good governance, because they refuse to compromise on greater good goals, and they engage in stoking division and encouraging acrimony and causing chaos. This is pathetically poor leadership.

Introduction to the Authoritarian Playbook

As this exploration of electoral autocracy in various countries begins, keep in mind that, according to the Protect Democracy website: "Before the 1990s, authoritarian leaders bent on upending democracy typically came to power forcefully and swiftly, often by means of a military *coup d'état*. The moment democracy ceased to exist could be time-stamped and reported on with a block headline."

"Yet for at least the last thirty years, the threats to democracy have evolved. Today, democracy more often dies gradually, as the institutional, legal and political constraints on authoritarian leaders are chipped away, one by one. This has happened -- or is happening -- in, among others, Russia, Venezuela, Hungary, the Philippines, Poland, Nicaragua, India, Turkey -- and the United States."

"By using 'salami tactics', slicing away at democracy one sliver at a time, modern authoritarians still cement themselves in power, but they do so incrementally and gradually. Sometimes their actions are deliberate and calculated, but sometimes they are opportunistic, myopic, or even bumbling. There is no longer a singular bright line that countries cross between democracy and authoritarianism. But the outcome is still the same." -- "Backsliding democracy."

How Democracies Falter These Days

"We tend to think of democratic decline as something that happens in big dramatic moments -- a coup, a government collapsing, tanks in the streets. But that's not typically how it happens anymore." This observation was made by journalist Blake Hounshell, who provided valuable perspective in September 2022 in *Why the U.S. Is Being Ominously Compared to Hungary and Turkey - A conversation with Max Fisher, who covers the decline of democracy around the world*.

"What happens is more like what has occurred in Venezuela, say, or Turkey or Hungary. Elected leaders rise within a democracy promising to defeat some threat within, and in the process end up slowly tearing that democracy down."

"Each step feels dangerous but maybe not outright authoritarian -- the judiciary gets politicized a little, some previously independent institution gets co-opted, election rules get changed, news outlets come under tighter government control."

"No individual step feels as drastic as an outright coup. And because these leaders both promote and benefit from social polarization, these little power grabs might even be seen by supporters as saving democracy. But over many years, the system tilts more and more toward autocracy."

"That doesn't always end up leading to full-on dictatorship. But that pull toward elected strongmen rulers is something we see happening in dozens of countries. By the sheer numbers, according to a democracy-monitoring group called V-Dem, more democracies are in decline today than at any other point in the last century." This is decidedly NOT GOOD!

"The United States fits pretty cleanly into what is now a well-established pattern of democratic backsliding. First, society polarizes, often over a backlash to social change, to demographic change, to strengthening political power by racial, ethnic or religious minorities, and generally amid rising social distrust."

"This leads to a bottom-up desire for populist outsiders who will promise to confront the supposed threat within, which means suppressing the other side of that social or partisan or racial divide, asserting a vision of democracy that grants special status for 'my' side, and smashing the democratic institutions or norms that prevent that side from asserting what is perceived to be its rightful dominance."

"You also tend to see political parties and other establishment gatekeepers, who are in theory meant to keep authoritarians from rising in politics, either weaken or become co-opted. Once populist hardliners gain enough power to begin eroding democratic checks, such as an independent judiciary or the rule of law, it's usually a steady slide toward democratic erosion."

"This trend has really picked up speed, globally, only in the last 20 years or so. So it's hard to say exactly how common it is for countries that begin this path to end up like Hungary or Turkey. But very few democracies have begun to slide and then reversed course."

The best plan, obviously, is to seek common cause with concerned fellow Americans, and prevent from succeeding those who seek to gain power by circumventing democracy.

Hope is Found in Accurate Information and Understanding

These issues present "a unique challenge for journalists, who are committed to providing the public much needed information and context about important news. Contemporary democratic breakdowns are far more difficult to identify because -- in snapshots -- they can mimic the typical acts of political jockeying to gain advantage that are routine even in healthy democracies. But especially as these acts accumulate and intensify, hard-nosed politics can cross a line into authoritarian threats. Unfortunately, there is no simple bright-line answer or mechanical test to distinguish between the two."

"At the same time, because authoritarianism -- all around the world -- tends to follow clear and consistent patterns, we can use these patterns to separate the signal from the noise. This basic framework -- the authoritarian playbook -- can help isolate clear and immediate dangers to democracy from partisan outrage, political hyperbole, and sensational spin."

"The press has a foundational role to play in how democratic systems hold leaders accountable, and doing so requires clarity about the gravity and implications of their actions. Understanding and recognizing the authoritarian playbook as a whole can help journalists not only decide what to cover as threats to democracy, but can also help enrich and contextualize coverage about how the individual components of the playbook fit together. Americans suspect that their democracy is at risk. But by identifying and connecting individual threats to democracy to the global whole, reporting can help inform voters about more than just what is happening -- it can tell them what the news means." And it can enlighten us as to how to best protect vitally important liberties and democratic fairness.

"Covering the authoritarian danger requires that the press do two things: understand the interlocking components of the playbook itself, and distinguish between normal political jockeying and genuine authoritarian moves. This briefing is designed to help journalists do just that."

Identifying the Authoritarian Playbook

A number of scholars who are experts on democracy, autocracies and history "have written extensively about how would-be authoritarians pursue power and how democratic systems backslide towards more authoritarian forms of government."

On the Protect Democracy website, an illuminating examination of the Authoritarian Playbook is presented that reveals extraordinary information, summaries and analyses, and it spells out 7 Basic Tactics in the Authoritarian Playbook. Examples are given of Case Studies of each of these seven tactics in various countries, including Argentina, Russia, Hungary, the Philippines, India, Venezuela and Nicaragua. There are also suggestions for

journalists on how to cope with repressive censorship, disinformation and other facets of threats to media independence posed by authoritarian rule.

Aspiring modern authoritarians employ the same seven basic tactics in the pursuit of power. They are:

- (1) Politicizing Independent Institutions -- All democracies have functions that operate independently from partisan political actors, from law enforcement to central banking to the judiciary. Authoritarians attack and seek to capture those institutions.
- (2) Spreading Disinformation -- Many politicians lie, but authoritarians propagate and amplify falsehoods deliberately and to obscene extents, with abandon and ruthlessness.
- (3) Aggrandizing Executive Power -- Authoritarian projects cannot succeed without the cooperation or acquiescence of legislatures, courts, and other institutions that let leaders abuse power and infringe on people's freedoms.
- (4) Quashing Dissent -- Strong democracies have robust opposition parties and an independent press. Authoritarians seek to silence those sources of criticism and dissent.
- (5) Marginalizing Vulnerable Communities -- Many authoritarians intentionally attack vulnerable people and groups, sowing division and attempting to turn people against each other.
- (6) Corrupting Elections -- 21st-century authoritarians generally maintain the facade of elections while tilting the rules against their opponents, threatening them, suppressing votes, gerrymandering, compromising the integrity of elections, and biasing or even overturning results.
- (7) Stoking Violence -- Most autocrats deliberately look the other way from political violence, and many actively inflame violence by stoking fears, division, and feelings of insecurity or victimhood. They do this in order to gain power through skullduggery and the use of tactics involved in *Divide-to-Conquer Roguery*.

The Kinds of Outcomes We Should Seek

Before getting into the ugly details of how authoritarian regimes repress peoples in specific nations around the world, recognize that prophylactic measures are needed to strengthen democracy and protect people from those who are intent on abusing power. Some of these measures needed right now in the U.S. are:

- (1) Uphold the principle that nobody is above the law.
- (2) Ensure sensible and meaningful checks and balances on executive power.
- (3) Make sure that those who attack or undermine our democracy are held accountable — regardless of their political standing.
- (4) Stop abuses of authority that target marginalized groups to reduce their ability to participate in democracy.
- (5) Protect the ability of the public and the press to voice dissenting views.
- (6) Protect independent, non-politicized law enforcement and Department of Justice personnel, and responsible civil servant workforces.
- (7) Take effective steps to honestly legitimize the Supreme Court by establishing an enforceable judicial code of ethics for the high court, and set clear parameters for recusals when conflicts of interest exist and/or there are appearances of such conflicts. Also, put in place 18-year term limits for high court Justices, with regular appointments over the spans of every presidential administration to ensure that Justice is fair and adaptive, and isn't ossified in political partisans appointed for lifelong terms.
- (8) Pass and ratify a new Constitutional Amendment to rein in corporate power and drastically constrain institutional bribery by rejecting the *Citizens United* ruling that allows unlimited corporate spending in our elections and lobbying. See the proposal by the Move to Amend Coalition that seeks to "end corporate rule" and "legalize democracy" (The text of the proposed Amendment is shown a couple pages below.)
- (9) Prevent every president, now and in the future, from circumventing Congress like Trump did with his border

wall construction without congressional approval or financing.

Electoral Autocracy in Turkey

"Today's authoritarians," writes Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a scholar on authoritarian leaders and fascism, "often keep elections going to preserve a veneer of freedom, but over time they manage to game the political system so the results assist the leader and his party to remain in power for many years."

In May 2023, Turkey's president Recep Erdogan won re-election in a narrow victory over opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu. Erdogan has been in power since 2003, so it was ominous that he declared in his victory speech, "We will be together until the grave." And he may be right because he has politicized the judiciary, stacking it with loyalists and reducing its independence, and he has purged thousands of opposition and military leaders, and arrested or marginalized journalists and censored social media platforms and the Internet.

"While Turks must endure Erdogan and his repression for another five years, those of us who live in democracies cannot leave the fight against electoral autocracy to lawyers and the courts. We must use our rights to mobilize and protest while we still have them, and act to reduce polarization by reaching across the political divide." So says Ruth Ben-Ghiat.

"True resilience requires overcoming divisions through dialogue and consultation with the people -- lessons that have applicability well beyond Turkey." So wrote Ekram Imamoglu, an opposition leader who was sentenced to almost three years in prison in 2022 for the concocted egregious crime of "insulting election officials".

One reason Erdogan needed to game the political system in 2023 was due to Turkey's economy being in crisis, with inflation ranging from 85% in October 2022 to 40% in May 2023 and back up to over 60% in September through November. The responsibility for this is due in part to Erdogan's contrarian low interest rate policies through May -- which then were forced to be increased steeply to a crippling 30% in late September and up to 42.5% in later December. Also, "Government negligence deepened the devastating effects of the Feb. 2023 earthquake, which killed 50,000 Turks and left millions full of despair and anger."

"So, Erdogan acted to neutralize the only man who could have beaten him. Ekram Imamoglu, the popular mayor of Istanbul, could not become the opposition's presidential candidate because Erdogan put a multi-year jail sentence over his head, claiming he had insulted government officials in the past."

"Once Erdogan fixed that problem, it was time to focus on making campaigning unpleasant and dangerous for the opposition. During the run-up to the first round of voting in mid-May, Imamoglu's campaign bus (he was canvassing for Kilicdaroglu) was attacked by pro-government thugs throwing rocks. Kilicdaroglu even had to tell supporters to stay at home and avoid public celebrations for their safety if the opposition won. This is the reality of Erdogan's Turkey."

"The government upped its game further for the May 28 run-off, dispatching more young loyalists of Erdogan's AKP party to voting stations to menace voters and claim electoral fraud. These AKP operatives are the equivalent of the armies of partisan poll watchers the GOP in the U.S. has recruited to harass and intimidate voters."

"The escalation of violence near or at polling stations during this final round of voting was symptomatic of increasing polarization and hate rhetoric in Turkey. Preparing for this election the president updated his threats against secular and LGBTQ+ Turks with rants against "wokeness" and transgender people -- an example of how the GOP's talking points align with those of Moscow and Ankara."

These understandings provide persuasive reasons for patriotic Americans to stop voting for MAGA Republicans, and stop letting them get away with abuses of power and failures of leadership.

More Insight into Crony Capitalism

Before continuing with exposing the sordid details of many of the ways autocratic governments negatively impact societies, let it be clearly understood that one of the most seriously consequential faults of autocracies is that they engage in win-lose crony capitalism.

Crony capitalism is an economic and political system in which businesses thrive not as a result of free enterprise,

fair competition and free markets, but rather as a result of collusion between favored businesses and politicians on issues like tax breaks, insider deals, government concessions, permits, grants and bailouts. Cronyism corruptly distorts economic activities and negatively affects society by undermining public-serving economic, political and social values and the propriety of dealings. In crony-based systems, money is made not merely by succeeding in making profits in the market, but through profiteering by rent seeking and gaining monopolistic advantages.

In the U.S., crony capitalism is exemplified by figures like Donald Trump, whose self-dealing and transactional efforts to benefit his cronies and loyalists as rewards for their support are overarching aspects of his activities and priorities. Also, Ron DeSantis is a pathetically consummate crony capitalist, as evidenced by his many sweet deals for big donors and his contrasting rash weaponization of Florida government against Disney in his waging of an almost diabolically demented crusade against the company because it has publicly objected to his anti-LGBTQ "Don't Say Gay" culture war offensives.

"DeSantis has catered to special interests as ferociously as he has fought the culture wars," writes Molly Redden in her article *In Ron DeSantis' Free State Of Florida, His Ear Has A Steep Cost*. "DeSantis wields near-dictatorial sway over his state, which he has used to grant special interests a breathtaking list of favors. He has helped them evade accountability, steamrolled regulations, funded their pet projects, and foisted costs of bailouts and tax breaks onto ordinary taxpayers. Often he does so quite openly."

"The Florida governor's version of freedom has come at a steep cost. It's a formula he's taking to the 2024 GOP presidential race."

"By the time his first term ended, DeSantis had a gigantic seed fund for his presidential ambitions. The Herald-Tribune's political editor counted 42 billionaires among DeSantis' donors."

"DeSantis has collected millions of dollars from companies with business before the state of Florida -- such as Florida Power & Light. He cruised to reelection in November 2022 having raised \$217 million, more money than any governor in U.S. history." Such Big Money is a powerful corrupting force.

As Brendan Ballou explains in *Plunder: Private Equity's Plan to Pillage America*, Big Money interests leverage the domineering power of their deep pockets to benefit themselves, often to the extreme detriment of the American people. Such excessive advantages for the wealthy few make it idiotically easy for an entitled "super minority" to run roughshod over the common good and the best interests of the people. Adding to this the profoundly corrupting gargantuan influence of giant corporations, which was facilitated by the egregiously wrongly decided 5-4 ruling by Supreme Court "conservatives" in the 2010 *Citizens United* case, and this makes our system one of institutional bribery that allows our representatives to pervert our national priorities and impose policies that allow cost socializing scams and a wide range of "tragedy of the commons" outcomes.

Election financing in the U.S. is unbelievably corrupted by allowing big donors to have vastly greater influence than smaller donors (and those who can't afford to give financial support to candidates). Soon after the 2022 midterm elections, the respected Brennan Center released a report on the amount of money spent on the elections, revealing that the top 100 megadonors spent about 60% more than all the small donors put together. "That's 3.7 million small donors being outspent by 100 individuals," said Ian Vandewalker, senior counsel for the Brennan Center's Elections and Government Program, where he works to address the influence of money in politics and foreign interference in U.S. elections.

"This midterm was the most expensive midterm ever across state and federal elections, with something like \$17 billion spent. And a large percentage of that came from mega donors," Vandewalker said. This, it appears clear, is corruption incarnate!

To counter the highly negative impacts Big Money is having on democracy and fairness, we should adopt a new Constitutional Amendment, as proposed by the Move to Amend Coalition.

"Move to Amend: End Corporate Rule. Legalize Democracy."

"On January 21, 2010, with its ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, the Supreme Court ruled that corporations are persons, entitled by the U.S. Constitution to buy elections and run our government. Human

beings are people; corporations are legal fictions."

"We, the People of the United States of America, reject the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Citizens United* and other related cases, and move to amend our Constitution to firmly establish that money is not speech, and that human beings, not corporations, are persons entitled to constitutional rights."

"The Supreme Court is misguided in principle, and wrong on the law. In a democracy, the people rule."

Electoral Autocracy in India

Democracy is backsliding in India due to its version of electoral autocracy and the aggressive efforts of its leader Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist government to malign, scapegoat, marginalize and wage attacks on minority groups (especially Muslims). Modi and his Party also demonstrate a rather Machiavellian zeal for following the Authoritarian Playbook, doing things like quashing dissent, intimidating journalists and opposition activists, and putting pressure on human rights groups.

Freedom House, a US-based non-profit organization that publishes an annual report on global political rights and liberties, downgraded India from a free democracy to a "partially free democracy" in its 2021 report, due to these flawed aspects of the backsliding of democracy in India. Under Modi's regime, Freedom House indicates, there has been "a deterioration of political and civil liberties in the country." Freedom House also said civil liberties have been in decline ever since Modi came to power in 2014, and that India's "fall from the upper ranks of free nations could have a more damaging effect on the world's democratic standards." Stronger democracies are needed, not crippled ones.

Electoral Autocracy in Hungary

Hungarian president Victor Orbán has explicitly rejected liberal democracy that Hungary once enjoyed, saying that its emphasis on multiculturalism weakens the national culture, and its insistence on human equality undermines traditional society by recognizing that women and LGBTQ people have the same rights as straight white men. The age of liberal democracy is over, he says, and a new age has begun.

In place of equality, Orbán advocates what he calls "illiberal democracy" or "Christian democracy." In July 2018, he said, "Christian democracy is, by definition, not liberal; it is, if you like, illiberal. And we can specifically say this in connection with a few important issues -- say, three great issues. Liberal democracy is in favor of multiculturalism, while Christian democracy gives priority to Christian culture; this is an illiberal concept. Liberal democracy is pro-immigration, while Christian democracy is anti-immigration; this is again a genuinely illiberal concept. And liberal democracy sides with adaptable family models, while Christian democracy rests on the foundations of the Christian family model; once more, this is an illiberal concept."

The Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in the U.S. and its representatives have become increasingly close to Hungarian leader Victor Orbán as he has asserted autocratic power in his country. Orbán was the opening speaker at the CPAC in Texas in August 2022, where he called for a global right wing agenda to be established to work to destroy liberal democracy and establish Christian supremacy.

The American right wing has heard the call, openly embracing Orbán's principles. Senior correspondent Zack Beauchamp of *Vox*, who has been described as a crackerjack analyst of right-wing political ideology in the U.S. and abroad, noted in 2021 that there is a marked rise of right-wing ideologues who see themselves as the vanguard of a "post-liberal order."

Beauchamp explained that these ideologues reject American democracy. They argue that "religious liberty, limited government, 'the inviolability of private institutions (e.g., corporations),' constitutional originalism, academic freedom, free markets and free speech" -- all central tenets of democracy -- have created "liberal totalitarianism" that has destroyed "all institutions that were originally responsible for fostering human virtue: family, ennobling friendship, community, university, polity, church." Oh, right -- Sounds like real BS to me!

"They see the government institutions that defend these democratic tenets as part of a totalitarian system designed to destroy national virtue. If this were truly the case (it is not), it would be an act of heroism to try to destroy those systems altogether. Right-wing attacks on the FBI, the Department of Justice and even the

government itself over the arrest of January 6th rioters, who they insist were peaceful tourists, shore up the idea that the FBI and DOJ are part of a government determined to crush Trump supporters. That ideology invites those who believe it to continue to attack government."

Orbán has focused on LGBTQ rights as a danger to "Western civilization." Arguing the need to protect children, his party has made it impossible for transgender people to change their gender identification on legal documents and made it illegal to share with minors any content that can be interpreted as promoting "an LGBTQ lifestyle." After Orbán put allies in charge of Hungarian universities, his government banned public funding for gender studies courses. According to his chief of staff: "The Hungarian government is of the clear view that people are born either men or women."

CPAC speaker and conservative political commentator Michael Knowles stated that transgenderism must be eradicated from public life. This "was not simply an attack on transgender individuals, although it was certainly that. Tapping into the anti-LGBTQ sentiment that Orbán and those like him have used to win voters, the statement was a crucial salvo in the attempt to destroy American democracy and replace it with Christian nationalism."

"But there is a very simple answer to the radical right's attack on LGBTQ people that also answers their rejection of democracy. It is an answer that history has proved again and again. Once you give up the principle of equality, you have given up the whole game. You have admitted the principle that people are unequal, and that some people are better than others. Once you have replaced the principle of equality with the idea that humans are unequal, you have stamped your approval on the idea of rulers and subjects. At that point, all you can do is to hope that no one in power decides that you belong in the lesser group."

"In 1858, Abraham Lincoln, then a candidate for the Senate, warned that arguments limiting American equality to white men and excluding black Americans were the same arguments 'that kings have made for enslaving the people in all ages of the world.... Turn in whatever way you will -- whether it come from the mouth of a King, an excuse for enslaving the people of his country, or from the mouth of men of one race as a reason for enslaving the men of another race, it is all the same old serpent.'"

"Either people -- men, in his day -- were equal, or they were not. Lincoln went on: 'I should like to know if taking this old Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men are equal upon principle, and making exceptions to it ... where will it stop?'"

Electoral Autocracy in Poland

In Poland, an estimated half a million people recently marched in the streets to protest the loss of rights for women and LGBTQ people amid an attack on democracy by the nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS). Leaders for PiS condemned the protest as a "march of hate," claiming they are only trying to protect traditional Christian values from Western ideas (and tolerant trends).

The protest march took place on the 34th anniversary of the first democratic elections in Poland in 1989, when the Soviet Union was disintegrating. Former Polish prime minister Donald Tusk, currently president of the European Council, called for the march, and told the crowd: "Democracy dies in silence but you've raised your voice for democracy today; silence is over, we will shout."

Protests have been ongoing in Poland over the actions of the ruling Law and Justice party, and Polish citizens have told the Associated Press they fear their country, long a bastion of democracy, is following Hungary and Turkey down an autocratic path. Law and Justice party leaders have been accused of making inroads against people's freedoms, violating the constitution, causing erosion of independent media, and wreaking legal chaos with insidious "reforms" to the judiciary.

Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and his government have denied that Poland is a backsliding democracy. Morawiecki says he just wants to "protect traditional Christian values against liberal pressures from the West," according to Reuters.

Surprisingly, and fortuitously for democracy and the general welfare of the Polish people, opposition parties in Poland surprisingly won enough seats in national parliamentary elections on October 15, 2023 to take power away from the Law and Justice party.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat wrote, "At last, a victory for democracy. After recent electoral defeats of opposition forces in Turkey, Israel, Hungary, Italy and elsewhere, Poland voted to turn back autocracy. The sympathies of Polish President Andrzej Duda for the far-right Law and Justice party (the ruling party of Poland since 2015) could prove problematic, and Law and Justice received the most votes (over 35%). Yet Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition and its partners should be able to form a centrist-progressive government."

"It's not surprising that this election saw the largest turnout of voters since the fall of Communism in 1989. The stakes could not have been higher. Vladimir Putin's genocidal war on Ukraine, which is unfolding on Poland's doorstep, is a stark reminder of the horrors that a fully realized autocracy can unleash on the world."

"And Poland was going down the path of unfreedom. It had all but lost its democracy after years of assaults by Law and Justice and its allies on the rule of law, judicial independence, and a free and fair electoral system. Tusk and other opposition politicians faced sham investigations and smear campaigns."

"State capture of the media had also advanced, with dozens of radio and television stations directly or indirectly controlled by the government. Just like Gazprom in Russia, Poland's state energy company PKN Orlen owns dozens of media properties. As Anne Applebaum informed *Atlantic* readers in a pre-election assessment of the opposition's chances, state messaging was ubiquitous: even the utility bills Poles receive carry words of support for government policies."

"As long as the Law and Justice government is in power, Poland is like an unconquered fortress,' current Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki had declared during the campaign, and raised the specter of uncontrolled non-White immigration if his party were to be defeated. The opposition soon uncovered his hypocrisy by exposing a visa-selling scheme in which some government officials financially benefitted from more than 100,000 African and Asian workers entering Poland. But rhetoric is everything for faux populists such as Morawiecki, a wealthy multilingual international banker who has degrees from Germany, Switzerland and the U.S., and who has made attacks against 'globalists' his currency."

Threats of Electoral Autocracy in the United States

Home-grown authoritarians in the GOP are busy trying to create electoral autocracy at the state and federal level in the U.S., so that Republicans won't be hurt at the ballot box and can continue to defend their top priority of low taxes on the rich, contrary to the popular will and the general welfare, along with other wrongheaded policies like depriving women of reproductive rights and protecting the gun lobby despite the grotesque epidemic of mass killings of Americans.

Republicans have been using culture wars to divide Americans for decades, and the party has gone full MAGA in recent years, ramping up efforts to drive wedges between people, especially between voters in the working class that they target by stoking grievances, shifting blame, and hyping-up culture war resentments.

"MAGA has co-opted our international symbol of hope and freedom -- the American flag -- for an ugly and violent cause. And it's the duty of the pro-democracy coalition to reclaim the flag and everything it represents. It's time for us to #TakeBackTheFlag."

According to Indivisibles in February 2023, "It is the second week of Black History Month and what else would we expect to talk about but a potential Republican presidential nominee working to gut advanced placement African American Studies courses? That's right, MAGA Republican Ron DeSantis threatened to ban the advanced placement course -- his Department of Education saying that it is 'inexplicably contrary to Florida law and significantly lacks educational value.' We are not surprised by this: Last year, DeSantis signed a bill that restricts how teachers can talk about race with students, and he has continually waged a war on LGBTQ+ individuals -- through bills like 'don't say gay' -- while taking a specific aim at attacking the medical rights of trans children."

"This is not a quirk of Southern politics. This is a concerted plan, by a major leader in the MAGA Republican party,

to attack marginalized Americans in a bid for power."

Republicans have been fooling voters on consequential issues for decades, and this is getting worse. Senator Chuck Grassley admitted in June 2023 that the GOP is "not interested" in whether all the accusations it is making about President Biden and his family are "accurate".

"Republicans are just nakedly admitting what is obvious to everyone, which is just like Benghazi before it, the GOP-led investigations into the Biden family and the innuendo surrounding them are a blatant political attempt to bring down Biden's polling numbers and hurt his prospects for winning reelection, as Chris Hayes has said."

Rep. Jim Jordan, somehow still chairman of the House Committee on the Judiciary and chair of the "Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government", is pathologically the head of this partisan subcommittee that has been convened "to defend the interests of one man -- Donald Trump." And MAGA Republicans in the House of Representatives are trying their damndest to weaponize Congress against anyone who opposes their agenda and their chaotic, disruptive and anti-patriotic ruses.

It should be clearly understood that, to an autocrat, loyalty to the authoritarian leader is the most important thing, no matter how disloyal and harmful that may be to the country and its people. Loyalty by supporters is critical to autocrats regardless of whether that loyalty is truly patriotic or not, and whether or not such loyalty is actually in the best interests of the people.

"At the heart of strongman rule is the claim that he and his agents are above the law, above judgment, and not beholden to the truth," Ruth Ben-Ghiat wrote in *Strongmen* in 2020. "In Trump's America ... the legal and the illegal, fact and fiction, celebrity and politics blend together until nothing means anything anymore and everything is 'a confidence game'."

"Long ago, Trump let it be known (including by pardoning criminals) that all forms of lawlessness would be rewarded as long as loyalty and public adulation of the leader continued."

One way abusers of authority stay in power is by preventing investigative reporters, anti-corruption investigators and influential critics from exposing their malfeasance and helping hold them accountable. This is why Kevin McCarthy and his MAGA Republicans in the House censured Adam Schiff, a strong voice against Trump's impeachable offenses and the January 6 insurrection. Lawrence Tribe, Professor of Constitutional Law Emeritus at Harvard University, who was one of Adam Schiff's former law school professors and a lifelong friend, points out that "Republicans are doubling down on their attacks on him because they know he has been one of the most effective members of Congress at investigating corruption, and holding them accountable."

Compounding and complicating all their shady dealings and treachery, the GOP has manufactured five fake crises to deflect people's attention from the real big problems and crises we face. This deflection is being done to distract voters "from the near record share of the nation's income and wealth now going to the richest Americans," observes Professor Robert Reich. We surely would be vastly better off to ignore and reject this cunning distraction -- and to pay greater attention to what's happening in political gamesmanship, and recognize why. We would be better served by focusing on remedial actions to ameliorate the real crises we face, which include climate change, the Russian war on Ukraine and the horrible war between Israeli and Hamas, along with the global pandemic and future disease threats, widespread hunger, corrupt abuses of power, authoritarian takeovers, high inflation rates, record levels of national debt and other things like the opioid crisis, cyberattacks, and unsustainable assaults on biodiversity and the environmental commons.

We have important business to address, House Republicans!

And always remember, there is great truth in the notion that we should *Sow Justice, Harvest Peace*..

Context: Why This Matters

Cause and effect operate inextricably in our interconnected and interdependent world. To protect people's freedoms and promote democratic Golden Rule fairness -- and thereby create a more just, secure and peaceable society -- citizens must see clearly, be well-informed and understand accurately.

These great values are existentially threatened by scheming leaders, political factions, conniving politicians, religious extremists and corporate entities that use deceit, emotion manipulating divide-to-conquer tactics, misinformation, disinformation, Southern Strategy racism and abuses of influence.

Consider the five fake crisis fears the GOP has been whipping up, as explained by Robert Reich:

1. "Woke." Florida's governor (and flailing Republican presidential candidate) Ron DeSantis has declared "war on woke." Immediately after the mangled launch to his campaign, he claimed on Fox News that "the woke mind virus is basically a form of cultural Marxism." But what is woke? Can anyone define it? It seems like an all-encompassing term for what we used to consider tolerance -- an attribute that in a different age was considered positive.
2. "Trans people." Former president Donald Trump says that one of his top priorities if he's reelected in 2024 will be a "sweeping federal rollback of transgender rights." But why have he and so many Republican lawmakers targeted transgender people as dangers to the public? There's not a shred of evidence that trans people are threats to anyone. But they're easy scapegoats.
3. "Critical race theory." Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin's "day one" executive order banned the teaching of critical race theory. DeSantis and Texas Governor Abbott have also banned it from schools. Here again, though, there's no evidence of a public threat. CRT simply teaches America's history of racism, which students need to be aware of to be informed citizens. Banning it is a scare tactic to appeal to a largely white and culturally conservative voter base.
4. "Couch potatoes." Ronald Reagan railed against so-called "welfare queens" who he harshly criticized for collecting benefits without working. Today's Republicans rage about "couch potatoes." Both characterizations are cruel pretexts -- and racial dog whistles -- for imposing additional requirements for work on public assistance for those in need, even though the needy often have difficulty finding work that pays enough to live on.
5. "Out of control government spending." "Rubbish." In fact, discretionary spending has fallen more than 40 percent in the past 50 years as a percentage of the nation's gross domestic product (from 11 percent to 6 percent). Lately, rising deficits have been driven by Social Security and Medicare (to be expected, as boomers retire), and by defense spending and George W. Bush's and Donald Trump's huge tax cuts that mostly benefited the wealthy and big corporations. Bush and Trump tax cuts will have added \$8 trillion and \$1.7 trillion, respectively, to the debt by the end of the 2023 fiscal year.

"All five of these so-called crises have been manufactured by the GOP. They're entirely made up."

"As the super-wealthy and big corporations pour money into politics -- especially into the GOP -- they don't want the rest of America to notice they're rigging the economy for their own benefit. They don't want voters to be aware of their unrestrained greed and the worsening impacts it's having on the climate crisis -- or the extent to which they are undermining democracy."

"So the game of the Republican Party and their major donors is to deflect and distract -- to use scapegoating, racism, and outright lies to disguise what's really going on", writes the honorable and admirably astute professor Robert Reich.

"Friends, don't let them get away with it," he urges.

An Entertaining and Illuminating Aside on "Woke"

To more clearly understand the devious nature of "conservative" attacks on being "woke", listen in to Jim Hightower, the sensible Texan author, agitator and activist. He says the following in a highly respectable attempt to spread the good word about true populism, under the simple notion that "everybody does better, when everybody does better."

"In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Humpty Dumpty scornfully declares that, 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean'."

"So what does 'woke' mean? It's become the pet political aspersion that today's kooky right-wing hucksters hurl at liberals, but the hurlers would be whopperjawed to learn that it's was actually coined by and for *progressives!*

Indeed, it admonishes people to be awake to the dangers posed by hate-filled bigots and reactionaries like ... well, like today's right-wing extremists."

"Surprising Historical Tidbit: The first person reported to have used the word was Huddie Ledbetter, the legendary Black blues artist known as Lead Belly. Among his many classic songs was 'Scottsboro Boys,' about nine Black teenagers falsely accused in 1931 of raping two Alabama white women. As a Black musician who traveled the (dangerous) backroads of the Jim Crow South, Lead Belly warned others to pay attention when in a viciously racist state: 'Best stay woke,' he cautioned."

"But -- out of blind ignorance, blind arrogance, or both -- today's adaptors of the Jim Crow mentality have perverted common-sense wokeness into a verbal whip to lash African-Americans, immigrants, Democrats, women, LGBTQ+ people and all others they don't like (pretty much everyone who looks, thinks, prays and acts different from them). How kooky? They've declared librarians, science, Mickey Mouse, and Bud Light to be their evil enemies. 'Don't be woke,' they bark, demanding autocratic, plutocratic, and theocratic laws to coerce compliance with their own retrogressive bigotries."

We should bear in mind, Jim Hightower concludes, "that this is no longer a fringe cult, but the mainstream of the Republican Party, including its top congressional leaders, presidential wannabes, and state officials. Actually, you can easily comprehend what these Humpty-Dumpties really mean by their 'Don't Be Woke' war cry. Just substitute the word 'sane' for 'woke!'"

"Strongmen" Authoritarians

Strongmen-type leaders weaponize authority, abusing it recklessly and mercilessly, and they harshly discriminate against many individuals and groups of people.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat wrote in her article *For Strongmen like Trump, Holding Office is a Means of Committing Crimes with Impunity*: "Getting away with crime and becoming untouchable is an essential aspect of authoritarianism."

"Another chapter opened of former president Donald Trump's version of the authoritarian playbook when he made remarks to supporters at his Bedminster, N.J. golf club after his post-indictment arraignment in Miami on June 13. He deviously and manipulatively declared, 'They want to silence me because I will never let them silence you. And I am the only one that can save this nation because you know they're not coming after me, they're coming after you. And I just happened to be standing in their way. And I will never be moving.'"

"These remarks 'may have seemed spontaneous', wrote Ruth Ben-Ghiat. "Yet they are carefully calibrated. They continue the propaganda points and emotional manipulation that have allowed his leader cult and his bonds with his followers to endure more than two years after leaving office."

"Yet Trump is in the middle of the strongman's worst nightmare -- an indictment that could lead to a conviction and jail sentence -- and his rhetoric has accordingly escalated. Everything he is doing and saying right now has one goal: getting him back into the White House so that he can realize the strongman's dream of committing crimes with impunity and neutralize anyone and anything that can harm him." He sees this as a deserved get-out-of-jail-free card.

"The purpose of holding office, for strongmen like Trump, is not governance, but having the power to get away with crime. This is the essence of authoritarianism, a political system that converts rule of law and democratic institutions, like the judiciary, into bludgeons to use against the press, prosecutors, investigators and others who can expose the corruption of the leader and his allies."

"Conventionally corrupt politicians think twice before running for office while under investigation: why risk the spotlight, opposition research and a ruined reputation? That's not how strongmen roll. Their corruption often prompts their entry into politics and they are always laser-focused on creating the conditions for their legal and financial problems to vanish once and for all."

"Trump ran for president in 2016 while his Trump University fraud case was active (he settled it by paying \$25 million in 2018). Trump's kindred spirits Vladimir Putin, Silvio Berlusconi, and Benjamin Netanyahu acted similarly. It was no surprise that Netanyahu made 'judicial reform' his cause as soon as he got back into office."

"Trump's vow at Bedminster to 'totally obliterate the Deep State' is along these lines (the 'deep state' including investigative and prosecutorial entities such as the FBI and the DOJ), and is entirely self-serving."

"The first Fascist dictatorship came into being under similar circumstances. Benito Mussolini was prime minister of a democracy when a special investigation incriminated him in the 1924 murder of Italian Socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti (which he ordered and his thugs carried out). To avoid the ruin of his political career, Il Duce declared dictatorship in 1925."

"Then he replaced the impartial magistrates with Fascist-friendly ones who decreed him guilty only of involuntary manslaughter, clearing him of direct responsibility for the crime and setting him up to rule without limitations on his power. Pardoning all political criminals later that year, including the blackshirt thugs whose violence brought him into office in the first place, completed the cycle."

"In Trump's case, he missed his first chance to be Il Duce 2.0. His coup failed and now he is unprotected from the exercise of justice and the rule of law. His victimhood ideology and the mass indoctrination of Americans by Fox and other media sources have kept him the front-runner for the GOP nomination by a wide margin. The indictment did not affect his standing, polls show."

"Yet with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, his former VP Mike Pence, and other GOP elites running against him, he has to keep his devotees' loyalty and his victimhood cult going."

"Authoritarianism requires that enemies be depicted as existential threats. 'If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore,' Trump told his followers just before they assaulted the Capitol on Jan. 6, joining the multitudes who have committed violence on a strongman's behalf."

"In his remarks at Bedminster, Trump declared, 'they're not coming after me, they're coming after you.' It's not enough for him to be under duress; this will be a long-haul legal proceeding, and some of his followers might tire of it." (Or they might recognize his guilt -- and the serious implications.)

"The smart demagogue turns the threat onto the crowd, letting them know they are the targets: they will be silenced and unfree without him. Luckily, he will never let that happen and is ready to take the fall for them. 'I will never be moving,' he tells them, repeating his recent comment about continuing to run for president even if convicted: 'I will never leave.'"

"And indeed, Trump won't leave the White House if he returns to the presidency, since he will quickly do what he needs to make himself beyond prosecution." The extensive evidence for this assertion can be found in my essay *SALVATION FROM THREATS POSED BY MAGA TRUMPMANIA*.

"In the meantime, he will seek to create as much turmoil and civil strife as possible to build an appetite in Americans for a savior who will make all the chaos stop. That, too, is part of the authoritarian playbook, and it never ends well."

"The GOP was already becoming a Trumpian party when Trump appeared to complete its self-destruction," Ruth Ben-Ghiat wrote in an August 2020 *New York Review of Books* essay. "Enticing and intimidating individuals into becoming their worst selves is what authoritarians do best. On this count, Trump has succeeded magnificently."

Three months after that article in 2020, "Trump denied he had lost the presidential election, opening up a state of exception in American politics that put Republican politicians to the test. Far from finding the courage to break with their cult leader, party elites became even more submissive to his loyalty demands. That made them complicit in his attempts to overturn the election and incite a violent coup attempt on Jan. 6 to interrupt the peaceful transition of power."

Cowardice is the antithesis of courage, and Republicans like those "moderates" in the House are demonstrating epic historic levels of cowardice, and concerns for their own jobs and lives, and damn all others (including their constituents).

"The GOP has been transformed by such cult dynamics, which dictate how party elites behave and what kinds of individuals find a foothold there. Day after day, we witness one of the largest political parties in the world remake

itself as an autocratic entity, discarding the values, norms, and rituals of democracy."

"Authoritarians don't just hollow out democratic institutions, but also debase the meaning and practice of politics, reducing it to lies, leader worship, and violence against enemies. That's why authoritarian parties become havens for a toxic mix of craven opportunists, racist bullies, and amoral individuals who are attracted by partnering with a leader who has no limits or restraints."

"Some of these politicians realize the leader is using them, but are too complicit with his crimes to exit the game. In saving him, they believe they can save themselves. Others, who share the leader's transactional mentality, understand that when political ideals have collapsed, being used and using others is the game."

Attention to Israel and Benjamin Netanyahu's Role in Authoritarian Governance

Kudos to the Israeli people for engaging in widespread protests against Netanyahu's ruses and tactics. And shame on Netanyahu for having increased Israeli risk and vulnerability to brutal terrorists through his Trump-like actions. Watch the illuminating documentary *King Bibi* to better understand Benjamin Netanyahu and his crafty ability "to use media, charisma, and political acumen to maintain power, despite facing numerous controversies and challenges."

Robert Reich observed that Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari wrote a recent piece in the *Washington Post* seeking to explain why Israel was unprepared for the grotesquely brutal terrorist attack on October 7. Harari said that Israel has been "governed by a populist strongman ... who is a public-relations genius but an incompetent prime minister. He has repeatedly preferred his personal interests over the national interest and has built his career on dividing the nation against itself. He has appointed people to key positions based on loyalty more than qualifications, took credit for every success while never taking responsibility for failures, and seemed to give little importance to either telling or hearing the truth."

"The coalition he established has been by far the worst. It is an alliance of messianic zealots and shameless opportunists, who ignored [the nation's] many problems -- including the deteriorating security situation -- and focused instead on grabbing unlimited power for themselves. In pursuit of this goal, they adopted extremely divisive policies, spread outrageous conspiracy theories about state institutions that oppose their policies, and labeled the country's serving elites as 'deep state' traitors."

"The point is this: Whether named Netanyahu, Trump or Putin, when authoritarian leaders gain power by dividing the public, spreading baseless conspiracy theories, and accusing opponents of being 'deep state' traitors, they weaken a society's capacities to protect itself from all sorts of threats."

"They undermine the public good, which is the wellspring of a society's true strength."

"Netanyahu, Trump and Putin have imperiled each of their nations by filling them with lies, paranoia, and distrust."

Defending Democracy

"The rule of law," wrote Amanda Taub in her *New York Times* article *A Trump Turning Point? History Isn't So Sure*, "including holding leaders accountable for wrongdoing, is a foundational element of liberal democracy. Particularly when the accusations involve subverting democracy itself."

In constitutional systems, no one is above the law. This is a vital underpinning of democracy. "But in highly politicized systems," Amanda Taub observed, "indicted politicians can recast prosecutions as attempts to thwart the will of the people -- another foundational element of democracy. That can undermine faith in the legitimacy of the courts and political system, which can be used to justify attempts to interfere with them, fueling further cycles of political crisis or even violence."

Amanda Taub added, "There is a long history of leaders trying to cling to power to maintain immunity from criminal charges." She cites Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel -- and now Trump -- as illustrative examples.

Tragically, the Republican Party has been hijacked by a sick strain of political extremism in recent years that has been enabled by discriminatory gerrymandering of congressional districts. Republicans use the power so gained to

act contrary to the popular will, imposing vile dictates on pregnant women, deceiving people and exploiting their emotions, and betraying fairness principles of equitability and inclusion.

The once respectable GOP has wed itself to Donald Trump and his illicit abuses of influence, wildly mischaracterizing efforts to hold him accountable for serious felonies and other misdeeds, and going along with his vindictive malignant narcissism and intense chagrin at having lost the 2020 election. Fox News, Breitbart and conservative talk radio are tearing the country apart in a crusade to promote a right-wing social and economic agenda. In so doing, they give cover to the GOP in its attempts to cement rule by their minority faction and to impose reactionary policies and priorities on the people, especially as regards issues of women's rights, LGBTQ rights, guns, climate change, environmental protections, etc.

Donald Trump and Republicans pose an existential threat to our democracy. If Trump were to be elected in 2024, he plans to govern in dictatorial fashion and offers few positive proposals compared to Democrats. In fact, "unable to come up with new policy ideas, former president Donald Trump has returned to playing the greatest hits. A case in point: He is once again threatening to repeal Obamacare." This, despite the significant popularity of the Affordable Care Act. As nationally syndicated opinion columnist Catherine Rampell observes, "It's hard to think of a more wrongheaded campaign promise than this, on both political and policy grounds."

When voting for a presidential candidate, a wide range of considerations and perspectives should be evaluated. It should not merely be a personality contest. Voting for president is about MUCH MORE than the candidate. "It's about over 80 years of the progressive movement we're in danger of losing because we're not looking at the bigger picture."

Voting on such a critically important choice as who should lead the most powerful nation in the world should take into account the biggest issues, like who is best disposed to champion a strong Environmental Protection Agency and defend the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act; and to implement robust protections of voting rights, the Affordable Care Act, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps and higher minimum wages; to support the right for a woman to choose to have an abortion, and LGBTQ rights and marriage equality; to support worker's well-being and collective bargaining rights; to provide generous funding to the public schools, clean energy alternatives, environmental research at the Department of Energy, intercity and high-speed rail grants, the Community Development Fund for affordable housing, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and a liberal majority on the Supreme Court that will overturn *Citizens United* and protect the blessings of liberty for the American people.

The Surpassing Merit of Democracy and Democratic Fairness

This important riff has been added to *Comprehensive Global Perspective: An Illuminating Worldview (Book Seven of the Earth Manifesto)* as Chapter #8a:

A strong democracy is vitally important to the general welfare, for fair representation helps guarantee broadly fair policies because it is dedicated to the health, security and best interests of all the people,

Since democracy and democratic fairness are crucially important for the overall well-being of the people, it is deeply disturbing that Donald Trump is trying to claw his way back into power in the upcoming 2024 national elections -- and that his agenda is to concentrate more power in his own hands if he manages to win the presidency, thereby upsetting the balance of power between the executive branch and Congress and the judiciary.

Trump presents an existentially dire threat to American people due to his self-centered drive to again grab power and impose new forms of despotic rule on the citizenry. Details about this were revealed by Jonathan Swan, Charlie Savage and Maggie Haberman of the New York Times on July 17, 2023 in their article *Trump and His Allies Forge Plans to Increase Presidential Power in 2025 — representing an extraordinarily grave threat to our democracy.*

"Donald J. Trump and his allies are planning a sweeping expansion of presidential power over the machinery of government if voters return him to the White House in 2025, reshaping the structure of the executive branch to concentrate far greater authority directly in his hands."

This would be a vengeful catastrophic calamity for our democratic republic, and for peoples of the world. "The former president and his backers aim to strengthen the power of the White House and limit the independence of federal agencies." And, dauntingly, "Neutralizing the media's power to expose his well-documented corruption would be one of his top priorities."

This story is repeated in *SALVATION FROM THREATS POSED BY MAGA TRUMPMANIA*. Historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a scholar on fascism and authoritarian leaders, wrote two days after this New York Times story that "Trump's plans to reshape the federal government to give himself vast personal powers if he returns to the White House in 2025 would make the United States similar to authoritarian systems in which the executive branch wields outsized power with respect to the judiciary and legislature."

Those plans "are consistent with a 21st century playbook for authoritarians: Tell the public how you will set up an authoritarian state well before you get into office. Frame your intended expansion of executive powers as a mere streamlining of government. Don't forget to repeatedly praise dictators as 'brilliant' and 'top of the line' people so there'll be no surprises when you act in a similar manner. And whet your followers' appetites for destruction of existing norms by advertising how you will purge 'the sick political class that hates our country' from government."

"Many Americans have become habituated to Republicans normalizing exceptional events -- the violent Jan. 6, 2021 coup attempt being a glaring example. Even so, as a scholar of authoritarianism," wrote Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "I was chilled by Trump associates' casual descriptions in the Times' report of how he and they intend to destroy the independence of democratic institutions and make them serve Republican, and more specifically Trumpian, ends. The destruction of democracy is being marketed to Americans as a kind of equalizer, a 'correction' of a system currently skewed to liberal priorities."

"The plan is for Trump to finish the devastating work he started during his first term of rooting out any civil servant attached to professional ethics. To take the State Department as an example, retired Ambassador Nancy McEldowney likened what already happened there under Trump's tenure to a 'hostile takeover and occupation,' with nearly half of career ministers retiring or pushed out in just the first two years of his presidency." This weakens our nation, and torpedoes diplomacy.

"Remember the executive order that implemented a travel ban from Muslim-majority countries? It was part of a planned blitzkrieg on our democratic system. 'Get used to it. @POTUS is a man of action and impact ... Shock to the system,' Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway tweeted a week after his inauguration in January 2017. 'And he's just getting started.'"

"As for how they might accomplish this takeover, given that Trump has talked about terminating the Constitution -- and incited an insurrection to stay in power illegally -- nothing is off the table. There's a reason that the Protecting Our Democracy Act, passed by the House in 2021, would have limited 'abuses of presidential power,' including misuse of states of emergency. At the very least, stripping employment protections for potentially tens of thousands of civil servants, who could be replaced with Trump ideologues, offers a quick way to remake the profile of the federal bureaucracy."

The New York Times report contained the following additional insights about Trump and his allies' plans for a sweeping expansion of presidential power over the machinery of government.

"Their plans to centralize more power in the Oval Office stretch far beyond the former president's recent remarks that he would order a criminal investigation into his political rival, President Biden, signaling his intent to end the post-Watergate norm of Justice Department independence from White House political control."

"Mr. Trump and his associates have a broader goal: to alter the balance of power by increasing the president's authority over every part of the federal government that now operates, by either law or tradition, with any measure of independence from political interference by the White House, according to a review of his campaign policy proposals and interviews with people close to him."

"Trump intends to strip employment protections from career civil servants, making it easier to replace them with loyalists if they are deemed obstacles to his agenda. These government employees should properly be nonpartisan professionals and experts who are protected against being fired for political reasons."

"Trump views the civil service as a den of 'deep staters' who tried to thwart him at every turn when he was in office, including by raising legal or pragmatic objections to his immigration policies, among many other examples."

And the Trump cabal "plans to scour the intelligence agencies, the State Department and the defense bureaucracies to remove officials he absurdly vilifies as 'the sick political class that hates our country.'"

The Sad Implications of Devious and Detrimental Distractions

One revealing gauge of the bottom line result of divide-to-conquer machinations is that social cohesion and political trust are being dealt severe blows. Political trust is near historic lows in the USA today -- and this state of affairs is dysfunctional and highly undesirable -- and must be remedied.

In a democracy that has free and fair elections and a healthy media that provides good information, trustworthy candidates who demonstrate integrity are elected and good governance reigns supreme. In tragic contrast, in electoral autocracies where many citizens are marginalized or overwhelmed with deceitful propaganda and manipulative fear-mongering, treacherous candidates often win elections and govern in ways that are terribly contrary to the common good.

Political trust is "the glue that keeps democracies together", so it is deeply unfortunate that public trust in government is near historic lows these days, "as it has been for much of the 21st century," according to the Pew Research Center in its study of *Public Trust in Government: 1958-2022*.

"Only two-in-ten Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right 'just about always' (2%) or 'most of the time' (19%)."

"When the National Election Study began asking about trust in government in 1958, about three-quarters of Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing almost always or most of the time. Trust in government began eroding during the 1960s, amid the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the decline continued in the 1970s with the Watergate scandal and worsening economic struggles. Confidence in government recovered in the mid-1980s before falling again in the mid-1990s. But as the economy grew in the late 1990s, so too did confidence in government. Public trust reached a three-decade high shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but declined quickly thereafter. Since 2007, the shares saying they can trust the government always or most of the time has not surpassed 30%."

The Kettering Foundation observed in a 2022 study titled *Race and Political Trust in the United States* that racial inequalities and discrimination play large roles in differences in trust expressed by Black and Hispanic groups compared to Whites, for obvious reason (the study is well worth reading).

The Pew Research Center has stated that trust "is an essential elixir for public life and neighborly relations, and when Americans think about trust these days, they worry. Two-thirds of adults think other Americans have little or no confidence in the federal government. Majorities believe the public's confidence in the U.S. government and in each other is shrinking, and most believe a shortage of trust in government and in other citizens makes it harder to solve some of the nation's key problems."

"As a result, many think it is necessary to clean up the trust environment: 68% say it is very important to repair the public's level of confidence in the federal government, and 58% say the same about improving confidence in fellow Americans."

"Moreover, some see fading trust as a sign of cultural sickness and national decline. Some also tie it to what they perceive to be increased loneliness and excessive individualism. About half of Americans (49%) link the decline in interpersonal trust to a belief that people are not as reliable as they used to be. Many ascribe shrinking trust to a political culture they believe is broken and spawns suspicion, even cynicism, about the ability of others to distinguish fact from fiction."

"In a comment typical of the views expressed by many people of different political leanings, ages and educational backgrounds, one participant in a new Pew Research Center survey said: 'Many people no longer think the federal government can actually be a force for good or change in their lives. This kind of apathy and disengagement will lead to an even worse and less representative government.' Another addressed the issue of fading interpersonal

trust: 'As a democracy founded on the principle of E Pluribus Unum (out of many, one), the fact that we are divided and can't trust sound facts means we have lost our confidence in each other.'

"Even as they express doleful views about the state of trust today, many Americans believe the situation can be turned around. Fully 84% believe the level of confidence Americans have in the federal government can be improved, and 86% think improvement is possible when it comes to the confidence Americans have in each other. Among the solutions they offer in their open-ended comments: muffle political partisanship and group-centered tribalism, refocus news coverage away from insult-ridden talk shows and sensationalist stories, stop giving so much attention to digital screens and spend more time with people, and practice empathy. Some believe that their neighborhoods are a key place where interpersonal trust can be rebuilt if people work together on local projects, in turn radiating trust out to other sectors of the culture."

Those who push extremist absolutism violate the common sense wisdom embodied in greater moderation, as conveyed in my essay *Moderation, True Justice and the Golden Rule*. Review it for valuable insights that would lead us to taking positive steps to remedy the dysfunctional status quo.

Divisive gambits and strategies that demonize others and threaten violence (and encourage it) have nefarious impacts by causing broad harms, torpedoing collaborative problem solving and undermining the general welfare of the citizenry.

More on Electoral Autocracy in the United States

Republicans in the United States have been pushing measures like those in an electoral autocracy that restrict voting, especially since the 2020 elections and the Big Lie that Trump did not lose and Joe Biden won illegitimately. This is political corruption enabled by Big Money influence that is pushing the country toward being an electoral autocracy enabled and strengthened by an activist federal judiciary currently comprised of a 6-3 supermajority of partisan Republicans on the Supreme Court that is improperly predisposed to rule on issues contrary to the popular will and in favor of ideologically partisan hard-right decisions that often violate what is truly in the best interests of the majority.

This anti-democratic authority-abusing rule has allowed Republicans to gain a narrow majority in the House of Representatives. This slim majority was elected in many unfairly and discriminatorily gerrymandered congressional districts. Also, many legislative bodies in Republican-controlled states have gained disproportionate power due to gerrymandering and voting measures that restrict voting by Blacks, students, women and other groups that are considered most likely to oppose Republican dominance of decision-making at the national level and in the states.

Some states like Ohio are even engaging in alarming anti-democratic tactics that extreme legislators employ to undermine the voices and rights of people like never before. Ohio Republicans put Issue 1 on the primary election ballot in August 2023 that would have allowed only 40 percent of Ohioans to dictate policy for the remaining 60 percent. This disenfranchisement of the majority would have passed with only 50% of the vote, so it was a cynical calculation.

This anti-democratic maneuver was a direct threat to our democracy because it would have silenced the will of voters and subverted majority rule. Fortunately voters soundly rejected the shrewd ploy on August 8, 2023. Can't always fool the voters! In November, Ohio voters then passed an amendment to the state constitution protecting the right to abortion, which Republicans would have defeated if a full 60% of the vote had been required.

Voters in Ohio had been asked in the primary measure to basically devalue their votes and weaken democracy by raising the bar for passing amendments to the Ohio constitution. It was "a way for Statehouse Republicans, who used gerrymandering to give themselves super majorities, to block voters from using the ballot to reverse some of the preposterous laws they have passed", as a Cleveland News editorial explained it.

These perversions of fairness are making the United States of America into politically polarized and hostile States Divided, crippling our ability to fix problems and achieve greater good goals.

A big contributing factor to such a state of affairs in the United States -- as in Hungary -- is the excessive power exerted by religious absolutist Christian nationalists who are ingloriously undermining the critically important

separation of church and state, and stacking the judiciary with conservative justices that are flexing their power by imposing a hard-right agenda on the country. Among many other undesirable impacts, this is putting undue burdens on women by depriving them of agency in their lives, forcing many to have unwanted children, and perpetuating the status quo of patriarchal male supremacy in many ways.

Seems drastically crazy to me to cripple the responsible "deep state" and replace it with the ideological far-right rulings and dictates of unelected politically partisan power-abusing conservatives on the Supreme Court.

The reason conservatives in the U.S. lionize Hungary's leader Viktor Orbán, columnist Paul Krugman has observed, is because it is consistent with the far right's goals: "If you want your nation to become a bastion of white nationalism and social illiberalism, a democracy on paper but a one-party state in practice, Orbán's transformation of Hungary offers a road map. And that is, of course, what much of the modern Republican Party wants."

Like Viktor Orbán, "today's Republicans reject the principles that underpin democracy, including the ideas of equality before the law and separation of church and state, and instead want to impose Christian rule on the American majority."

Instead of respecting the "separation of powers" and the healthy checks and balances that make our democracy strong, flagrantly ethics-deficient Justices on the Supreme Court have "rapidly been accumulating power at the expense of every other part of the government."

According to the New York Times Editorial Board, the Roberts Court has been "arrogating to itself the authority to make policy decisions on issues, such as climate change, that had long been the province of Congress or executive agencies. A court that thus wields an astonishing degree of power over the daily lives of hundreds of millions of Americans has also walled itself off from outside scrutiny, operating like an ecclesiastical city-state in the heart of the American republic."

A Great Remedy: Pass the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact

To stop a wealthy minority from exerting domineering influence in the USA in choosing our leaders in the Executive branch, and to strengthen the power of the people and give the popular will greater sway, we need to overcome the dysfunctional aspects of having the president chosen by the antiquated Electoral College. To prevent our national priorities from being skewed and our national decision-making from being unfairly corrupted, we must pass the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact.

The National Popular Vote Interstate Compact is an agreement among a group of U.S. states and the District of Columbia to award all their electoral votes to whichever presidential ticket wins the overall popular vote in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. "The compact is designed to ensure that the candidate who receives the most votes nationwide is elected president, and it would come into effect only when it would guarantee that outcome." As of October 2023, it has been adopted by sixteen states and the District of Columbia, representing 205 electoral votes, which is 76% of the 270 votes needed to give the compact legal force. Another 23% is already pending. That's potentially 99% in sight!

The United States would be much fairer, and voters in every state would be given more equal influence, if the president was chosen by the majority, and this could be ensured if more states honorably signed onto the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact. This would also propitiously eliminate many of the inequities and procedural problems -- and opportunities for fraud -- associated with having the Electoral College choose the president and vice president.

Give Republicans the Boot in the 2024 Elections

Historian Max Boot wrote in an August 2022 article that *The GOP is Viktor Orbán's party now*. He observed:

"The libertarian-leaning Republican Party I grew up with in the 1980s is long gone and not coming back. Republicans still use the language of 'freedom,' but their idea of freedom is warped: They want Americans to be free to carry weapons of war or spread deadly diseases but not to terminate a pregnancy or discuss gender or sexuality in school."

"Some other term is needed. 'Christian nationalism' and 'nationalist conservatism' have been bandied about, but the most apt phrase for this American authoritarianism is the New Fascism, and it is fast becoming the dominant trend on the right. If the GOP gains power in Washington, all of America will be in danger of being Orbanized."

"One of Orban's longtime advisers quit over what she described as a speech 'worthy of Goebbels' before backtracking a bit. But Orban hasn't recanted his repugnant views, and right-wingers in Dallas thrilled to his denunciations of immigration, abortion, LGBTQ rights and 'the Woke Globalist Goliath.' He even excoriated Jewish financier George Soros, a Hungarian native, as someone who 'hated Christianity.' The racist and anti-Semitic signaling was not subtle."

"You can trace the current iteration of the Republican Party to the 1990s Gingrich revolution, as my brilliant Post colleague Dana Milbank does in a new book. Or you can go further back to the Goldwater revolution in the 1960s, as I did in my own book. But we must also acknowledge that something profound has changed in recent years."

Since the days early in the military fiascos of the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, the Republican Party has become even more pathologically contemptuous of expertise, hostile to dissent, and cruelly opposed to the well-being and rights of women, LGBTQ persons and the poor. And in foreign policy, Trump wants to cozy up to Vladimir Putin, and he and some of his supporters have suggested that Joint Chiefs Chairman Mark Milley should be executed for some concocted supposed treason.

Add to this toxic mess the incendiary fuel of stoked populist resentments, ratcheted-up deceitful propaganda, deviously false narratives and incitements to political violence, along with affiliations with autocrats abroad, and MAGA Republicanism poses an even more dangerous threat in American politics.

Politicians like Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis and Ted Cruz have basically engaged in rejecting the rule of law and undermining our democracy. They exemplify the authoritarian idea now dominant in the Republican Party that law is nothing more than a tool to advance one's ambitions. DeSantis and Cruz "are the shame of the legal profession -- and of Harvard Law."

Trump has become what he deviously claimed he was against, "what he abhorred, what he was fighting against -- just another old tired grifter politician bilking the rubes out of every dollar every day any which way he can do it."

Electoral Autocracy in Russia

In Vladimir Putin's Russia, sham elections are only one pathetic feature of a harsh, anti-democratic and repressive authoritarian regime that is oppressing the Russian people and posing dire threats to peace in the world with its war on Ukraine. Russia under Putin treats critics and dissidents severely, and has engaged in aggressively undermining other democracies around the world, as it did with its interference in American elections and politics in 2016 that helped Trump get narrowly elected.

"The democratic nations of the world are in a global struggle against authoritarianism," wrote David Brooks in his article *Defeat Trump, Now More Than Ever* (February 2022). "That struggle has international fronts -- starting with the need to confront, repel and weaken Vladimir Putin."

"But that struggle also has domestic fronts -- the need to defeat the mini-Putins now found across the Western democracies. These are the demagogues who lie with Putinesque brazenness, who shred democratic institutions with Putinesque bravado, who strut the world's stage with Putin's amoral schoolboy machismo while pretending to represent all that is traditional and holy."

"In the United States that, of course, is Donald Trump. This moment of heightened danger and crisis makes it even clearer that the No. 1 domestic priority for all Americans who care about democracy is to make sure Trump never sees the inside of the Oval Office ever again. As democracy is threatened from abroad, it can't also be cannibalized from within."

The Munich Security Report 2023, issued in February 2023, began by identifying Russia's invasion of Ukraine (which began almost exactly one year earlier) as "a watershed moment."

"Debates about different visions for the future international order are often abstract and theoretical," the report begins, but "by invading Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has made the clash of competing visions a brutal and deathly reality."

"The report goes on to identify a growing conflict around the globe between intensifying authoritarian regimes and a liberal, rules-based international order. It calls for shoring up that liberal order and for strengthening it by addressing the legitimate claims of countries and regions that have been excluded from that order or have even been victims of it. That many governments in Africa, Latin America, and Asia have refused to speak up against Russian aggression shows that there is deep dissatisfaction there with existing international patterns, and that dissatisfaction threatens the survival of democracy. The people of all countries must have a say in how the global future plays out."

The report notes that Russia's "brutal and unprovoked invasion of a sovereign state" is "an attack against the foundational principles of the post-World War II order," with "an authoritarian power" ruthlessly striving "to eliminate a democracy." And that's not the only sign that autocracies are rising. China's support for Russia, its attempt to assert its own sphere of influence in East Asia through military shows of force, and its wide-ranging efforts "to promote an autocratic alternative to the liberal, rules-based international order" show the broad challenge of autocratic rule. "The main fault line in global politics today," the report suggests, is "that between democracies and dictators."

"Many world leaders believe that the next ten years will lay down the blueprint for the future of the international order, the report says, and it credits Ukraine and the 'extraordinary resilience and determination of the Ukrainian people' with instilling 'a new sense of purpose into democratic countries.' The report encourages democracies to use this momentum to re-envision the liberal, rules-based order to include countries that previously were excluded from the rulemaking. A new order 'that better delivers on its promises' and 'truly benefits everyone equally' has the potential to increase the coalition of those resisting autocracy. 'If the revisionist moment we are currently experiencing spurs the renewal of this liberal, rules-based order,' it suggests, 'President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the people of Ukraine will have played a big part in this achievement.'"

MAGA Republicans, most unfortunately, are obstinately playing games with funding of Ukraine's resistance to Russian's aggression, trying to tie extreme immigration policies to renewed funding.

National Security Strategy

The Biden administration released the latest annual National Security Strategy on October 12, 2022. In it, the belief is reiterated that we are in a global struggle between democracy and rising autocracy and that the world is at an inflection point that will determine "the security and prosperity of the American people for generations to come." Sounds sufficiently important!

The document makes a strong call for American leadership to defend democracy and to reinforce the rules-based international system on which the world has depended since World War II. This system is now under attack as Russia has claimed the right to invade a neighboring country and redraw its boundaries by force, and as authoritarian governments seek to control global trade and power by withholding key resources -- like energy -- from other nations.

The National Security Strategy promises that the U.S. will work to strengthen democracy around the world "because democratic governance consistently outperforms authoritarianism in protecting human dignity, leads to more prosperous and resilient societies, creates stronger and more reliable economic and security partners for the United States, and encourages a peaceful world order." It also calls for the domestic development of key resources, especially energy, to reduce the ability of other nations to pressure us.

On October 15, 2022, historian Heather Cox Richardson provided valuable insight about the National Security Strategy in her *Letters from an American*:

The National Security Strategy highlighted just how big a catastrophe we dodged as Trump left office ... "Just as Trump's abrupt withdrawal from Syria left a vacuum for Turkish president Recep Erdogan and Russian president Vladimir Putin, and as Trump's planned but not executed withdrawal of troops from Germany would have hamstrung

the North Atlantic Treaty Organization so it could not have countered Putin's Russia, so would the abrupt disengagement of the U.S. around the world have created a giant vacuum for authoritarian countries to fill."

Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have made rebuilding NATO and reinforcing our traditional partnerships like those with the "Quad" -- which, in addition to the U.S., includes Australia, Japan, and India -- and advancing our alliances in the Indo-Pacific a top priority. On Thursday, Biden said his staff had calculated that he had spent about 220 hours talking directly with the heads of state at NATO and the European Union, "just holding it together" after Putin counted on NATO splitting up. Biden and Blinken have emphasized security, trade, and technology to knit the world together.

The NSS notes that "we are creating a latticework of strong, resilient, and mutually reinforcing relationships that prove democracies can deliver for their people and the world." Unified international support for Ukraine illustrates just how successful they have been. The NSS also emphasizes the importance of working with countries in Latin America to improve conditions in the western hemisphere in general and to weaken corruption, improve security, and strengthen democracy there. It calls for closer relations with African nations and African regional institutions, and it calls for a peaceful Arctic.

The NSS notes that Iran interferes in the internal affairs of its neighbors and is advancing a nuclear program and that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) is also expanding its illicit nuclear weapons. But above all, the NSS calls out Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) as key destabilizers of the international order. It notes that they are increasingly aligned with each other but present very different challenges to the U.S.

China is the only power able to reshape the international order, the NSS states, and is using technology to gain sway over international institutions to advance its authoritarian model, which in the past has provided a rising standard of living in exchange for a loss of freedom. The PRC has been able to use that economic power to pressure other countries to become dependent on it.

The NSS calls for strengthening the U.S. at home to compete with the PRC, working with allies and partners, and competing with the PRC in the Indo-Pacific region to strengthen the autonomy of countries there. (The recent U.S. demonstration of support for Taiwan was part of this demonstration, and it had the effect of prompting the PRC to overreact, demonstrating an instability that weakened ties to regional neighbors.)

And yet the NSS emphasizes that while the U.S. has "profound differences" with the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Government, those differences are not "between our people." ... "Ties of family and friendship continue to connect the American and the Chinese people. We deeply respect their achievements, their history, and their culture. Racism and hate have no place in a nation built by generations of immigrants to fulfill the promise of opportunity for all. And we intend to work together to solve issues that matter most to the people of both countries."

Turning to Russia, the NSS condemns "its longstanding efforts to destabilize its neighbors using intelligence and cyber capabilities, and its blatant attempts to undermine internal democratic processes in countries across Europe, Central Asia, and around the world," and notes that "Russia has also interfered brazenly in U.S. politics and worked to sow divisions among the American people." The U.S. will continue to lead "a united, principled, and resolute response to Russia's invasion" of Ukraine.

But the last several months have indicated that autocracies have their own problems. The PRC has doubled down on a zero-Covid policy that has hurt its economy and sparked internal protest. Tomorrow, the Communist Party will begin its 20th National Congress (congresses are held every five years). It is expected that President Xi Jinping will win a third term to consolidate his grip on power (he did) just as the U.S. has unveiled strict controls on selling semiconductors and chip-making equipment to China, restrictions that appear to be an attempt to kneecap Chinese advances in artificial intelligence and military capabilities.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has proved disastrous for Putin. As supplies and soldiers have drained into Ukraine, Russia's control of the lands around it has faltered, while his recent mobilization of the Russian population to fight in Ukraine has created extraordinary unrest at home. Putin is pressing Belarus's president, Aleksandr

Lukashenko, to join the war, but Lukashenko appears hesitant, likely suspecting that joining the disastrous war will mean his own political end.

For its part, Iran is facing internal protests sparked by the murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, known to her family by her Kurdish name Zhina, in the custody of "morality police" for violating the country's dress code. Saudi Arabia is not necessarily as strong as it has appeared lately, either. When its leaders recently sided with Russia by pushing OPEC+ to cut oil production and thus support gas prices, other OPEC+ countries told the U.S. that the Saudis had pressured them to do so. Saudi Arabia has suddenly offered Ukraine \$400 million in humanitarian aid, evidently trying to regain the goodwill of Europe and the U.S., since it imports almost all of its weapons from that bloc.

"The post-Cold War era is definitively over and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next," the NSS says. "No nation is better positioned to succeed in this competition than the United States, as long as we work in common cause with those who share our vision of a world that is free, open, secure, and prosperous. This means that the foundational principles of self-determination, territorial integrity, and political independence must be respected, international institutions must be strengthened, countries must be free to determine their own foreign policy choices, information must be allowed to flow freely, universal human rights must be upheld, and the global economy must operate on a level playing field and provide opportunity for all."

We know what should be done, and we must elect leaders most likely to achieve it, and reject deceivers and demagogues who play political games to succeed in usurping and abusing power.

Supreme Conundrums

Catch-22 circumstances are paradoxical situations that are hard for individuals to escape from, due to rules or limitations that are contradictory. In his novel *CATCH-22*, Joseph Heller's character Yossarian whistled at such a deeply cynical catch between sanity and insanity that required pilots to fly dangerous military missions. Such catch-22s are a perversion of logic and common sense.

I myself whistle at the sad Catch-22 dilemma of having the Supreme Court and many U.S. Courts of Appeals and U.S. District Courts in the federal judiciary dominated by right-wing Republicans who are politically partisan and thus see overarching merit in having state legislatures be more influential than state Supreme Courts and state constitutions. They hold this view for the corrupt reason that state legislatures have been gerrymandered to give Republicans and white males dominating power, and to discriminatorily deprive women, young people, college students, Blacks, Latinos and other minorities of influence and power. In other words, Republican judicial eminences reverse engineer the outcomes they want, and then restrict voting rights and make imperious rulings to achieve their retrograde goals -- giving MAGA extremists too much influence -- and giving an inadequate amount of respect to those who promote the greater good.

Absolutism in GOP priorities cements in place extreme inequalities, grave injustices, rashly cruel unfairness and the status quo of low tax rates for the top dogs in our society. Such an undesirably regressive tax regime results in a de facto condemnation of countless millions of Americans to premature early deaths. In Fresno, California, for instance, there is a 20-year difference in the average life spans of people in wealthy neighborhoods compared to people who live on the south side of the city in poorer neighborhoods.

More on Orbán and Authoritarianism

Historian Heather Cox Richardson observed on May 21, 2023: "Like Putin, Orbán cemented power with attacks on immigrants, LGBTQ people, and abortion rights while claiming to be shoring up traditional religion. Not surprisingly, both Putin and Orbán have praised Trump, with the overlap between the former U.S. president and the autocratic leaders becoming more pronounced as Trump's followers work to undermine U.S. support for Ukraine in its fight to push back Russia's invasion, and in the Conservative Political Action Conference's decision to hold an annual meeting for the second time in Budapest, Hungary in May 2023."

"That overlap is also visible in the anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, and antiabortion legislation spreading through U.S. states dominated by Trump loyalists."

"When Trump was in the White House, his team worked hard to put loyal supporters into power in state Republican parties before the 2020 election, possibly aware that he was likely to lose the vote and would have to turn to loyalists to steal it for him. (Recall that on October 31, 2020, Trump ally Steve Bannon told an audience that the plan was simply to say he had won, and now, in a lawsuit filed last week against Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani, Noelle Dunphy alleges Giuliani told her of the scheme on February 7, 2019.) Packing the state parties with loyalists did indeed pay off: according to a study by Nick Corasaniti, Karen Yourish and Keith Collins of the *New York Times*, at least 357 sitting Republican legislators in battleground states used their official positions either to discredit or to try to overturn the results of the 2020 election."

"Radicalizing the state parties has continued since Trump left office, strengthening his base in state legislatures. Those legislators are now advancing the illiberal Christian democracy embraced by Putin and Orbán, using the same language and politics of fear to pass laws that explicitly reject the principle of a nation based in the idea that is central to democracy: that everyone is equal before the law."

"The attempt to demonize immigrants has been central to the Trump base since he announced his presidential campaign with the statement that 'the U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems' and went on to say that Mexican immigrants are 'bringing drugs ... bringing crime. They're rapists.' (In fact, undocumented immigrants are less than half as likely as native-born Americans to be arrested for violent crimes or drug offenses.)"

"Republicans have refused to consider bipartisan legislation that would fund immigration courts and border security, and instead have hammered on the idea that immigrants are 'flooding' our borders. They fought to keep the pandemic-related Title 42 in place, insisting that its end would create, as Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) put it, an 'Imminent Invasion.' When, in fact, the end of Title 42 led to a (temporary) 60% decrease in unauthorized crossings, Greene still pushed forward, calling for Biden's impeachment for his handling of immigration issues."

"This same antidemocratic extremism explains the anti-trans, anti-drag, and anti-LGBTQ legislation, all of which are an attack on equality before the law. A March 8 article in *Mother Jones* by Madison Pauly exposed how the wave of anti-trans legislation passing through Republican-dominated state legislatures is written and pushed by well-funded Christian activists and organizations who argue, like Orbán, that they are protecting children (although 86% of trans or nonbinary young people have reported the attacks on them are affecting their mental health, and nearly half have seriously considered suicide)."

"Advocates for those laws inaccurately claim that they are protecting children from genital mutilation, but as Nancy Goldstein of the *Texas Observer* pointed out, the American Academy of Pediatrics stands behind gender-affirming care. Dr. Joshua Safer, the executive director of the Mount Sinai Center for Transgender Medicine and Surgery in New York City, explains: No other countries 'are reconsidering the use of hormones and surgeries as first-line treatment for transgender children because hormones and surgeries are *not* first-line treatment for transgender children First-line interventions include mental health intakes and social adjustments Puberty blockers sometimes follow.' Those treatments are reversible if a patient changes their mind."

"Nonetheless, the rhetoric of demonization is working: Brian Tyler Cohen reports (with video) that 'Christian' pastor Jason Graber recently called for the execution of all LGBTQ people as well as the parents of transgender people: 'They just need to be shot in the back of the head and then we can string them up above a bridge.'" (This is abominable ideology.)

"Goldstein points out that the language of demonization Republicans are using mimics that of the 'southern strategy,' by which Republican leaders from President Richard Nixon onward solidified their base by creating the idea that Black Americans threatened the well-being of white people. That strategy, too, is ongoing in the Republican Party. On Monday, May 15, Florida governor Ron DeSantis signed a bill that defunds any state college or university with a diversity, equity, and inclusion program and that bans courses that 'distort significant historical events or include a curriculum that teaches identity politics,' a reference to courses that acknowledge racism or sexism. Texas, Tennessee, North Dakota, Iowa, and Ohio are considering similar legislation."

"The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a Latino civil rights organization; Equality Florida, a gay rights advocacy group; and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) have all issued advisories warning against travel to Florida. 'Florida is openly hostile toward African Americans, people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals,' the NAACP said. 'Before traveling to Florida, please understand that the state of Florida devalues and marginalizes the contributions of, and the challenges faced by African Americans and other communities of color.'"

"With its antiabortion legislation, the MAGA movement is also signaling its abandonment of the idea that everyone should be equal before the law. Since the Supreme Court overturned the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision in June 2022, fifteen states have banned or severely restricted abortion rights." And a supermajority of the North Carolina legislature overrode the veto of the Democratic governor Roy Cooper, banning virtually all abortions after 12 weeks of pregnancy. This supermajority had been established when Tricia Cotham -- a devious politician who had been elected as a Democrat advocating abortion rights -- treacherously switched parties.

"In Sumner County, Tennessee, anti-democratic Republicans have taken over the county government and, as Christina Cassidy wrote in the *Associated Press*, promptly changed the county's official documents to say that operations would be 'most importantly reflective of the Judeo-Christian values inherent in the nation's founding.' They are trying to shape the county, including election rules, according to their ideology."

"MAGA Republicans led the threat to force the U.S. to default on its debt for the first time in history, which would have had catastrophic consequences. They held the nation hostage until Democrats agreed to protect all tax cuts and slash domestic spending that helps tens of millions of ordinary Americans. It's important to remember that the global autocratic movement is not only about creating traditional monotheistic religious societies; it is also about diminishing democracy 'to concentrate wealth and power in a small group of men, usually white men, who will dominate the rest of us.'"

Investigating Disinformation

In details from the Protect Democracy website about the Authoritarian Playbook, the authors seek to counter disinformation, observing that "Democratic decision making requires a shared reality based on facts. Without shared facts, citizens in a democracy cannot trust each other or our political leaders, or make informed voting decisions that hold our representatives accountable."

"Today in the United States, the unmitigated spread of disinformation -- false information deliberately spread by bad-faith actors -- threatens to make too many of us apathetic, or even actively hostile, towards democratic institutions and one another."

"But we have powerful tools to help stop disinformation and those who intentionally spread it. Together, we can create a healthier political discourse based on shared facts, genuine disagreement and honest differences of opinion."

"THE KINDS OF OUTCOMES WE SEEK:"

- Deter the spread of election-, voting-, and other democracy-related disinformation through litigation and other tools.

- Neutralize the biases in our information ecosystem that allow disinformation to spread more easily than facts.

- Disrupt the feedback loop that pushes elected officials toward enacting disinformation-driven policy.

Today we are in an era of rapid technological advancement, and the fight against disinformation is more urgent than ever. "As we approach the critical 2024 elections, the prospect of artificial intelligence-generated disinformation poses a significant threat to the integrity of our democracy."

Disinformation even poses real risks to our national security, as was seen when a fake image of an explosion at the Pentagon spread like a virus, being shared by verified Twitter accounts. "We cannot wait for more incidents to occur."

Bestselling author and radio host Charlie Sykes was once at the center of the American conservative movement, but has written the insightful book *How the Right Lost Its Mind*, and is now a fierce opponent of Donald Trump and

the right-wing media that enabled his rise. He calls Trump an apex predator, a characterization that is appropriate for the cult leader, considering his character and propensities and the threats he poses to our representative democracy.

Media: The Crucial Need for a Healthy "Fourth Estate"

Media freedom is in a dire state in a record number of countries, according to the latest annual snapshot revealed by the World Press Freedom Index, which warns that disinformation, propaganda and artificial intelligence pose mounting threats to journalism and to democracy and people's freedoms.

The latest World Press Freedom Index shows a shocking slide, with an unprecedented 31 countries deemed to be in a "very serious situation", the lowest ranking in the report, up from 21 just 2 years ago.

The Index ranks 180 countries and regions according to the level of freedom available to journalists. It is a snapshot of the media freedom situation based on an evaluation of pluralism, independence of the media, quality of legislative framework, and safety of journalists in each country and region.

The World Press Freedom Index is an annual ranking of countries (since 2002) that is compiled and published by Reporters Without Borders. It is based on the organization's assessment of the countries' press freedom records in the previous year. It intends to reflect the degree of freedom that journalists, news organizations and citizens have in each country, and the efforts made by authorities to respect this freedom. Reporters Without Borders is careful to note that the Index only deals with press freedom and does not measure the quality of journalism in the countries it assesses, nor does it look at human rights violations in general.

Increased aggressiveness from autocratic governments -- and some that are considered democratic -- coupled with "massive disinformation or propaganda campaigns" has caused the situation to go from bad to worse, according to the list released by the advocacy group Reporters Without Borders.

"There is more red on the map this year than ever before, as authoritarian leaders become increasingly bold in their attempts to silence the press," the organization's secretary general, Christophe Deloire, told the *Guardian*. "The international community needs to wake up to reality, and act together, decisively and fast, to reverse this dangerous trend."

Are things bad everywhere? The environment for journalism today is considered "bad" in 7 out of 10 countries, and satisfactory in only 3 out of 10, according to Reporters Without Borders. The UN says 85% of people live in countries where media freedom has declined in the past five years. This is not good!

Social Media and Its Malign Influences

In reporting and research for the book titled *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World*, a question was posed about what effects social media is having on democracy. Some "techno-evangelists like Clay Shirky were predicting that social media would unleash a wave of democratization in the developing world. Obviously, that hasn't happened. Or has it?"

Some initially saw social media as a democratizing force, like a lot of Arab Spring activists from the early 2010s, such as Wael Ghonim, the Egyptian revolutionary and Google engineer. "But, within a few years, Ghonim had come to conclude, he has said in a TED talk, that 'the same tool that united us to topple dictators eventually tore us apart' by 'amplifying the spread of misinformation, rumors, echo chambers and hate speech.'"

"A neutral social media really could be a democratizing force, in theory. But the major platforms are far from neutral. They are deliberately designed to manipulate you, and to manipulate your experience on the platform in ways that will change how you think and how you behave. These platforms do this not just by what they show you, but also by eliciting certain emotions and behaviors from you."

"All this digital manipulation, at the scale of maybe hundreds of hours per year, changes you. And not just online, but in your offline life, too. It changes your emotional makeup, the way that you approach politics, your sense of your own identity -- even the way that you process right and wrong."

"For an individual user -- and we now have hard, empirical, scientific evidence for this -- the effect can be to make

you angrier, more extreme and intolerant, more distrustful, more prone to divide the world between us and them, and more disposed toward hostility and even violence against people outside your social in-group."

"This might change you just by a matter of degree. But when you multiply this effect out by billions of users, and often among a majority of the population, the effect can change society as a whole, too, and especially its politics, in ways that can be detrimental to democracy."

"What do you think most people miss about the link between social media and threats to democracy?", asked an interviewer. "One thing that social platforms have done -- and it's hard to blame this entirely on Silicon Valley -- is to displace the traditional activism that is an important part of bringing about democracy or of preventing an existing democracy from backsliding."

"That activism used to happen through organizing among real-world networks, like student groups during the civil rights movement in the United States, or mothers' groups in 1970s Argentina resisting that country's dictatorship. Now, social media allows a protest group, even a leaderless one, to skip that process and, by going viral online, to activate thousands or even millions of people overnight."

"That is really effective at driving huge numbers of people onto the street, but not at much else."

"With the advent of social media, the number of mass protest events in the world shot way up. A million people marching on a capital city became a more common occurrence. But the success rate of those movements fell from about 70 percent to only 30 percent."

"The Yellow Vests, the French protest movement that began in 2018, exemplifies this. It was a stunning, spontaneous, nationwide uprising for political change. And it had been organized almost entirely through Facebook and other platforms. But it was also internally incoherent. For all its force, it quickly fizzled out, having caused a lot of traffic problems but having changed very little."

"Partly that was because of what had been lost in the displacement of traditional organizing. But partly it was also because of the distorting effects of those platforms. Those systems, just as they do for users globally, had pulled the Yellow Vests supporters who were gathering on those platforms toward extremes: demands to bar all refugees from the country, to default on the national debt, to replace elected legislatures with fuzzily defined citizens' councils."

"It's not the only reason the Yellow Vests mostly receded, but it is, I think, a metaphor for those platforms' effects on our societies and democracies broadly."

Ethical Considerations

Professor Edward Wasserman wrote an article about Daniel Ellsberg having acted as a whistleblower by disclosing to the American people the lies told by the U.S. government to escalate and prolong the war in Vietnam. In it, he wrote: "Ethicists talk about different routes to right actions -- seeking to comply with a rule truly worth honoring as so-called duty ethics urges, or seeking a broadly beneficial result, as consequentialists ask. But there's a third approach, known as virtue ethics, where right actions are seen as the product of character, and you act virtuously because you're a good person: You do things that are compassionate, fair-minded and brave, because that's who you are."

Join me in acting as a strong advocate for fairness, democracy and the Golden Rule!

As a final criticism in this essay of Republicans and their deliberately devious messaging, consider this curious understanding conveyed by a person posting on Quora:

"Republicans consistently project onto Democrats exactly what they are doing. Rather than legislate for the good of the people and Country, they make sad attempts to create cultural upheaval and claim there's a culture war. No, there is not."

"There's only them creating fear in their voters that their 'special' culture of white nationalism is being trod upon and other cultures are attempting to replace them. The truth is the number of whites here is declining slowly, but significantly, and organically, because less are born. We have a lot of old white people and that birth rate has

fallen. The Boomer babies were an anomaly."

"Republicans are canceling free speech, books, children, freedom, women, LGBTQIA, Disney, history, our democracy, voting rights, and on and on. See how that works? So, what is cancel culture, one might ask? It's what Republicans do, much more than what Democrats do."

"I will not address what they claim Democrats 'cancel', aside from saying it's all grievance politics that reflects their displeasure that things change naturally and organically, as time marches on and expand our base of shared knowledge."

MAGA extremism in the Republican Party today contrasts starkly to earlier decades when honorable Republicans had integrity and championed the conservation of public lands and reasonably inclusive freedoms for all citizens. Today, Republicans are broadly threatening freedom, as well as security, stability and sustainability, because of their chaos-embracing anti-government white nationalist isolationist strains, and the excessive influence of their religion-on-the-march backers, and their authoritarian embrace of retribution against opponents and their verbal attacks against anyone who dares stand against their extremist agenda and criminal totalitarian dictates.

In addition, Republicans are adopting a religious zeal characterized by a dictatorial stain of oppression of women's rights and further disenfranchisement of racial minorities in their fervor to wield domineering power and control -- and to do so ruthlessly.

It is morally wrong for politicians like Mike Johnson to weaponize the Bible by politicizing religion and cherry-picking passages to twist the meaning and noble spirituality of religious texts in order to impose a politically partisan, judgmental, discriminatory, vindictive white supremacist hegemony of harshly punishing absolutist control over the people.

And it is especially wrong to subjugate women to imperious dictates and "be fruitful and multiply" absolutism, while ignoring modern principles of fairness and equitable treatment, and to be zealously willing to sacrifice to expediency the responsible care for creation and protections of the environmental commons that is implicit in some passages in the Bible.

It is wrong to forsake responsible stewardship and efforts to care for creation in favor of pandering to vested interest groups. Fossil fuel profiteers who pump up profits by foisting cost externalities onto all others -- and onto everyone in the future -- are selling their souls for money, and power-hungry politicians who facilitate these damaging activities are selfishly sacrificing the future destiny of billions of people in order to do the bidding of rich people, giant corporations and big investors.

Note that this essay on authoritarianism and democracy rapidly evolved in the summer and autumn of 2023. More relevant perspective is on the way. Thanks for reading!

Truly,

Tiffany B. Twain

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