

Earth Manifesto



Core Values of Democracy - and How to Thwart Conspiratorial Threats Against These Values

July 2018, with latest update March 1, 2022

When I first published this essay on July 4, 2018, I wrote, "Bravo, my fellow Americans, as we commemorate Independence Day on its 242nd birthday! Our democratic republic has much to celebrate, but we currently face the most consequentially serious crises in our history, and we must deal honestly, honorably and effectively with this colossal challenge." Today, these dilemmas have gotten significantly more daunting.

Let's all exit our echo chambers, and congregate in the middle to seek collaborative compromises that improve our hopes for realizing greater good goals. Let's listen, and talk and debate respectfully, and seek common ground in principles most likely to contribute positively to *The Common Good, Properly Understood*. FOR ALL.

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing there is a field. I'll meet you there."

--- Rumi

This essay is dedicated to a clear understanding of the core values of a true democracy -- and the many threats against these propitious values. The fundamental tenets of democracy include an overarching commitment to common good goals and personal liberties; a reasonable modicum of equality of opportunity and justice for all; fair dealings toward everyone in their individual pursuits of happiness; popular sovereignty that assures fair representation and power to the people; inclusiveness in diversity; virtue in public service; fiscal responsibility; and honesty and patriotic dedication to human rights and these core values of democracy. In the United States of America, these Enlightenment Era-informed values are laudably set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and in evolving rules of law and a good many important documents, speeches and writings.

The word crisis is represented in Chinese by two characters roughly meaning 'danger' and 'opportunity'. Dishonest and manipulative politicians have gained excessive influence in the U.S. through a long litany of illegitimate means, and they are arrogantly abusing this power for a variety of wrongheaded purposes. *We the People* should rightly seize the day and use this period of dangerous opportunity to right our ship of state and restore assurances of healthier and safer communities, cohesive unity, expanded freedoms and prospects for future well-being. We must recommit our nation to vital values, and reclaim the virtues of good government by throwing off the shackles of the hegemony of excessively narrowly focused, profit prepossessed, scandalously corrupt, bamboozling and tyrannically anti-democratic rule by corporate interests, wealthy people and their enablers. Ecologically sane ways of living are called for.

There are many enemies of inclusive democratic values. They include influence peddlers, divisive demagogues, authority-abusing leaders, freedom-infringing opportunists and other greed-driven exploiters who support excessive power for the rich against the common good and the general welfare of the people in our democratic republic. There are those who consequentially distort the truth and undermine freedoms of the press, those who advocate primary privileges for white males at the expense of females and people of color, and those who champion corporate power over the rights, safety and well-being of individuals. There are many politicians who take ruthless advantage of people's emotions to gain power and greedily selfish benefits, and engage in pay-to-play schemes and self-dealing and other forms of political corruption that are corrosive to core values of democracy. And there are many excessively partisan conservatives in the judiciary.

There's something happenin' here
What it is ain't exactly clear
There's a man with a gun over there
A-tellin' me I got to beware

I think it's time we stop
 Children, what's that sound?
 Everybody look at what's going down.

--- *For What It's Worth, Buffalo Springfield, 1967*

Fair-Mindedness Is the Overriding Answer

Fairness-oriented representative democracies are crucial to protections of freedom and our collective hopes for flourishing. Unfortunately, democracy has been diminishing in recent years, as many organizations and individuals have been warning. A report released by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance found that in 2020 "the United States, the bastion of global democracy, fell victim to authoritarian tendencies itself, and was knocked down a significant number of steps on the democratic scale." It called Donald Trump's Big Lie a "historic turning point" that "undermined fundamental trust in the electoral process" and was a causative factor in the January 6th insurrection. The Institute's Global State of Democracy report also said that Trump's efforts to overturn the election had harmful "spillover effects" on other countries.

The study, which analyzed trends from 2020 to 2021, found that more than a quarter of the world's population now lives in democratically backsliding countries, which the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance defines as nations seeing a gradual decline in the quality of their democracy.

Despite the backsliding in many democracies around the world, "it wasn't all doom and gloom"; there is one bright spot, and that is that "Protest and civic action are alive and well." This provides hope, inspiration and guidance for *We the People* to seize the day and demand greater fairness.

Democracy is beneficial from standpoints of economic and human development, protections of health and socio-economic fairness, climate action and environmental protections, as well as international and domestic security. So intensifying "autocratization" around the world highlights needs for new programs to defend democracy.

An important way to improve prospects of democracy in the world "is to fix our democracy at home", says Professor Larry Diamond, a democracy specialist who was named "Teacher of the Year for 2007" by students of Stanford University for his excellence in teaching, which was judged to transcend political and ideological barriers. Professor Diamond has been honored for his "passion for democratization, peaceful transitions, and the idea that each of us can contribute to making the world a better place." Hallelujah for that passion!

According to the V-Dem Institute's Annual Democracy Reports, the outlook for democracy around the world is in decline in countries affecting almost one-third of the world's population. A main finding was that about 25 countries are now affected by what is a "third wave of autocratization", including populous countries such as Brazil, India and the United States, as well as several Eastern European countries like Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and Serbia. The total number of people so affected sadly surged from 415 million in 2016 to 2.6 billion in 2020.

In the previous Annual Democracy Report 2018, experts compared the United States' democracy score in 2017 with its average score over the previous 10 years, and described the pathological backsliding against liberal democracy in the USA as "precipitous and unprecedented". This has mainly been due to the weakening of constraints on the executive branch, which under "conservative" control seems to cherish the freedom to abuse authority at the expense of the liberties and well-being of the people.

When any political party in a country becomes radicalized, irresponsible, abusive of authority, uncompromising, opposed to democratic fairness, deeply dishonest, scornful of moderation, supportive of political extremists, and ruthlessly punitive of anyone who stands against them, this poses grave threats to freedoms, peaceful coexistence, civil rights, reform efforts, true progress, democratic governance and the general welfare.

No one I know likes to have tyrannical controls imposed upon them. So the vast majority of Americans should be able to readily agree that voters should not support politicians that threaten to subvert our democracy from within by acting in ways that help change it into a repressive authoritarian form of governance. And the evidence is blazingly clear that the political party that most threatens to impose such a change on us is the "conservative" party that is becoming more radical and extreme with its dishonesty, Big Lies, conspiracism, glaring lack of responsibility, and violations of ethical norms, rules of law and the U.S. Constitution. The Republican Party is "Republican in name only"

from the perspective of the party of honest Abe Lincoln and times of greater integrity, for it is throwing its lot in with extremists like violent insurrectionists and representatives that undermine the blessings of liberty and oppose reforms that would codify anti-corruption principles. This includes Marjorie Taylor Greene, Madison Cawthorn, Lauren Boebert, Matt Gaetz, Paul Gosar, Josh Hawley, Ted Cruz and cowards like House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy that shamelessly kowtow to Trump and pander to his base and take the bloviating Trumpster's side no matter how absurd his lies or how obvious his many misdeeds and arenas of malfeasance.

In a healthy democracy, citizens are safeguarded against despotism and authority abusing leaders. Timothy Snyder, the knowledgeable Yale professor of history, recognizing how dangerously radicalized the GOP has become, and has written in his book *On Tyranny* about twenty lessons from the twentieth century that could help save us from tyrannical rule. He provocatively observes, "Americans today are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism, or communism in the twentieth century. Our one advantage is that we might learn from their experience."

The "Great Divide" of growing inequality is having a tragic impact on the length of people's lives. An article in the New York Times by Annie Lowrey explored this issue by comparing life expectancies in prosperous Fairfax County, Virginia and much poorer McDowell County, West Virginia. Males in the county of "haves" live an average of 18 years longer than males in the depressed coal area of the "have nots", and even women in the richer county have an average life span 12 years longer than in the poorer county. "Poverty is a thief," concludes a professor of social justice. Poorer people smoke more, have less access to health care, eat worse and so suffer higher rates of obesity, and suffer the "debilitating effects of more intense and more constant stress."

This reveals that socioeconomic status is becoming an increasingly distinct factor in determining longevity, so the only fair course of action would be to propitiously change our national policies so that they do not facilitate an ever-increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. This is the right thing to do!

Many threats to American values and government are getting worse. Efforts to gerrymander hundreds of congressional districts have proliferated since 2010, protecting incumbents, as have laws intended to suppress voting, and cyber-threats to election security like those that benefitted Trump Republicans in 2016 continue. In addition, since the beginning of the pandemic, it has become riskier to vote in person, yet many Republicans took a stand against safe vote-by-mail plans. They have even worked to slow down the U.S. Postal Service and torpedo vote-by-mail initiatives to prevent many people from voting in the 2020 elections. As a result, overarching commitments are required to repair and defend our democracy, so that personal liberties and fairness of opportunity can be ensured, and systemic injustices can be remedied, and prospects are improved for the health and general welfare of the people. Strengthening our democracy is also necessary so that the legacy we leave to our descendants will have a much greater likelihood of being propitious and sustainable.

Gerrymandering tragically contributes to making our politics excessively polarized and uncompromising. Voting rights legislation is urgently needed to prevent extreme partisan gerrymandering and save our country from worsening effects of division and discord. One insidiously undesirable consequence of the politics of division is that it causes us to be collectively unable to solve big problems like economic inequality, institutional injustices, the destabilization of the global climate, and the ominous implications for humanity's future of our aggregate activities that are driving many species of life toward eternal extinction.

Moderation has great value, and this is one very good reason that it is wrong to allow incumbents to gerrymander voters into non-competitive congressional districts. There are many instances of extremism begetting extremism, both abroad and at home, and it is sadly true that liberal factions in politics and religions tend to counter-support reactionary factions by galvanizing the energy of strong opposition.

Checks and balances between legislative, executive and judicial branches of federal and state governments are critically important in defending democracy from factions that would deprive citizens of their civil rights, cherished liberties, general well-being, and individual and collective security.

The Fifteenth Amendment stipulates that the right to vote shall not be denied or abridged on account of race or color, and it gives Congress the power to enforce that requirement. When partisans in Congress refuse to honor this constitutional right, the federal judiciary should rule to prevent discriminatory gerrymandering.

When the legislative branch fails to do its duties to pass fair laws, enact reforms and hold the executive branch accountable, it makes it easier for abuses of power to take place. When the executive branch engages in malfeasance and stonewalls and defies subpoenas by Congress and refuses to be held accountable, it threatens our values and freedoms. When the judiciary is taken over by partisans and allows legislative and executive branches of government to get away with violations of fairness principles and laws and the Constitution, highly adverse consequences can result that undermine the general welfare, domestic tranquility and social cohesion.

Legislative redistricting contains inherent conflicts of interest, so the right thing to do is to remove authority for redistricting in every state from partisans and to make the process fair to all citizens by giving the responsibility for redistricting to non-partisan commissions. Blue states like California have taken this step to unilaterally disarm by fairly giving responsibility for redistricting to a non-partisan commission, but this gives Republicans in red states unfair advantages by allowing them to continue to aggressively cheat to win elections.

Recall the memorable scene in the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in which a fearsome man dressed in black suddenly appears in a crowded marketplace in Cairo, Egypt and confronts Indiana Jones. The scary swordsman laughs and brandishes his weapon. but then instead of engaging in a sword fight, Indiana Jones just nonchalantly pulls out a gun and shoots the menacing would-be assassin.

Democrats are basically engaging in prize-fight boxing matches with opponents who use brass knuckles, so it is as if they bring puny knives to a gunfight. Supporters of conservatives in the stands are brandishing intimidating military-style assault weapons, and unless Congress prohibits such tactics and ensures fairer election fights, partisan Supreme Court Justices apparently will not save the electorate from electoral doom, and American's future will never be rid of the scourge of cataclysmic polarization, Republican radicalism, and the on-going slide toward tyrannical domination of state and national governments by unprincipled anti-democracy factions that are irresponsibly, deceitfully, treacherously and dishonorably prepossessed with winning at any cost to get money, power and control.

Opinion columnist Paul Waldman wrote in *The Redistricting Apocalypse Is Here* that "The word 'redistricting' doesn't carry the same inherent drama as a crowd of rabid thugs breaking doors and windows to storm the Capitol. But the way it's proceeding right now, in its own way it's just as much of an assault on our democracy."

Righteously chanting "stop the steal", Republicans have been doubling down on their efforts to steal elections through gerrymandering, voting restrictions, and lately by intimidating opponents and election officials and even threatening and engaging in violence. And Trump loyalists are running for many secretary of state positions to be ready to overthrow any future election outcome that they don't like.

New voting restrictions and gerrymandering pose big threats to our democracy, along with on-going election sabotage efforts since the 2020 elections. Enemies of democratic fairness are unfortunately winning against defenders of democracy in many ways, at home as well as abroad. This situation is having tragic consequences for people, their well-being and cherished freedoms, as well as for humanity's future and prospects for survival of many species of life on Earth.

Another Blow to Democratic Fairness

One particularly effective assault on democracy for the next few generations is found in the Republican stacking of the federal judiciary with young, extremely partisan and sometimes even unqualified conservative judges. The speed with which Mitch McConnell ushered these judges through the Senate confirmation process "should send shockwaves across the nation," tweeted the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. One such judge was Kyle Duncan, "whose record clearly shows he's on the far-right fringe. Duncan has advanced an ideological agenda to diminish voting rights, LGBTQ equality, immigrant rights, and women's reproductive freedom. Now (as of April 2018), he's on the 5th Circuit for life."

Marge Baker of the organization People for the American Way pointed out, "Republicans are counting on these judges to dismantle reproductive rights, marriage equality, and the separation of church and state, and also to shred the New Deal and regulations that protect people from corporate power." Kristine Lucius, the executive vice president for policy and government affairs at the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, issued a statement singling out Texas district court nominees Jeffrey Brown and Brantley Starr for also being "hostile to voting rights, LGBTQ

equality, reproductive rights, and immigrant rights." She added, "Senate Republicans will stop at nothing to stack the courts with partisan judges who will push their radical agenda through at any cost. In doing so, they are not only degrading our courts, but also endangering our democracy."

The legitimacy of the Supreme Court has already been cast in the light of infamy by three narrowly partisan rulings in favor of political corruption by rich people and influence-abusing giant corporations. This exceedingly unfair and undemocratic troika of rulings is shown to be consequentially wrong because it threw open floodgates for Big Money to corrupt our politics in the 50 states and in the federal government in the year 2010, and then eviscerated the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and subsequently decided that the high court would do nothing about extreme partisan gerrymandering. These rulings give official injudicious sanction to corrupt politics that allows politicians to choose their voters, instead of allowing voters to choose the politicians they want to represent them. These rulings serve to disenfranchise many millions of people by depriving them of fairer representation.

Political scientist Steven Levitsky made the risks clear in his insightful book *How Democracies Die*: "This is how elected autocrats subvert democracy -- packing and "weaponizing" the courts and other neutral agencies, buying off the media and the private sector (or bullying them into silence), and rewriting the rules of politics to tilt the playing field against opponents. The tragic paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism is that democracy's assassins use the very institutions of democracy -- gradually, subtly, and even legally -- to kill it."

These developments are astonishing in light of the fact that our colonial ancestors were incensed at British taxation without fair representation. This was the basic reason that the Boston Tea Party uprising took place, which was a protest against the Tea Act of May 1773 that allowed the British East India Company "to sell tea from China in American colonies without paying any taxes, thus undercutting local tea merchants."

"Democracies may die at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders -- presidents or prime ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power. Some of these leaders dismantle democracy quickly, as Hitler did in the wake of the 1933 Reichstag fire in Germany. More often, though, democracies erode slowly, in barely visible steps."

--- Steven Levitsky, *How Democracies Die*

By letting anti-government ideologues grab excessive influence, extreme partisans have allowed rich people and undemocratic corporations to corruptly wield power over the people and betray their best interests. It seems as if unscrupulous con men were everywhere during Trump's time in office, especially in the highest echelons of business and government. Religious fundamentalists, for their part, generally support such malfeasance by proclaiming from the pulpit that domineering conservative influence is in accordance with the word of God.

The Bad Guys Are Winning

As the journalist and historian Anne Applebaum writes in an article in *The Atlantic's* December 2021 cover story, *The Bad Guys Are Winning*, autocratic regimes are posing increasing threats to democracies around the world. She exposes the dangerous conditions that have allowed leaders in countries including Venezuela, Belarus, Russia, China and Turkey to thrive in recent years, in part by working together to achieve their own selfish ends, often at the expense of the people in liberal democracies. Applebaum makes a haunting observation: "If the 20th century was the story of liberal democracy's progress toward victory over other ideologies -- communism, fascism, virulent nationalism -- the 21st century is, so far, a story of the reverse."

On the home front, all politicians pander to special interests to the detriment of many of their constituents, due to the excessive influence of Big Money in our elections and lobbying. Most politicians also twist the truth to some extent, and engage in dirty election tricks if they can get away with it, and try to sway voters to vote for them even when it involves deceitful spin and betraying the greater good.

But it is Republicans that pose the biggest threat to our democracy by being the most irresponsible in their zeal to gain power by any means they can get away with. They have worked relentlessly to undermine democratic fairness and erode the basic foundations of our democracy by making it harder for disadvantaged groups to vote and using unfair gerrymandering to disenfranchise tens of millions of citizens. They politicize public health measures like mask wearing and getting vaccinated during the pandemic, and often ignore scientific advice on the pandemic, causing

unnecessary deaths and prolonging the mutating contagion. They also contribute to endangering public safety by staunchly opposing gun safety proposals supported by a large majority. This litany of woes is compounded by their efforts to scapegoat immigrants and refugees, stand against Dreamers and comprehensive immigration reform, spread lies about alleged fraud in the presidential election of 2020 and then incite a MAGA mob attack on Congress on January 6, and now they are trying to obstruct and discredit the investigation into it. And they act as saboteurs against reasonable reforms and anti-corruption measures, striving to prevent efforts to fairly reduce dysfunction and economic inequalities and social injustices.

In addition to scheming factions at home posing serious threats to our democracy and the core democratic value of fairness, there are geopolitical rivals from other countries abroad, especially Russia and China. These enemies are autocrats who interfere in our domestic affairs, especially including Vladimir Putin in Russia, who worked to help get Trump elected and give power to swindling authority-abusing conservatives.

In late February 2022, Putin amassed large numbers of troops and military equipment around Ukraine and then invaded and occupied the country, creating unconscionable dangers and instability around the world.

The initial title of this essay was *The Odd Conspiracy Between Scheming Republican Politicians and Russian Subversion by Vladimir Putin*, so one focus of these ideas is on nefarious Russian influence on our society. The U.S. all but bankrupted the Soviet Union during the exceedingly costly internecine competition of the Cold War arms race in the years between 1945 and 1990. This was a dangerous hyper-militarized confrontation between nuclear superpowers, and it was colossally costly not only in terms of money, but also in lives lost and skirmish wars fought, and incalculable quantities of natural resources wasted, and the many opportunity costs associated with squandering so many resources on misdirected priorities. In 2016, Russia exacted a serious measure of revenge by interfering in our elections in a "sweeping and systematic fashion", and thereby undermined our democratic institutions, perverted our national decision-making, exacerbated racial strife, and helped enable rich people and giant corporate entities to get away with many corrupt anti-democratic schemes. This allowed abusers of power to intimidate and oppress those who oppose them, and exacerbate discord to deprive the American people of greater unity, health, tolerance, egalitarian fairness, security and personal liberties.

We should remember Abraham Lincoln's warning that a house divided against itself cannot stand. A populace divided falls victim more easily to power-abusing predations of democracy-undermining demagogues, con men, authoritarians, despots and cantankerous exploiters. Vladimir Putin knows even better than Trump and Republican politicians that success in driving wedges between people is a key to imposing authoritarian control over a people, for he has used this internecine tactic extraordinarily effectively against his own people.

Russian trolls and bots have engaged in cyber-attacks in the USA, churning up antagonistic divisions between Americans. This was demonstrated once again in the aftermath of the assault weapon massacre by a teenager at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on February 14th, 2018, when a surge of inflammatory social media activity bombarded millions of Americans. Quite a Valentine's Day present, Vladimir!

Revealingly, General Valery Gerasimov, the chief of staff of Russia's armed forces, published an article in 2013 that identified how Russia should engage in new methods for waging war against the United States and other Western democracies. He basically said information warfare and disinformation should be used to weaponize political divisions in other nations, so that hackers and skilled propagandists could replace riskier and much more costly head-on interventions by the army and air force against perceived enemies. In other words, Russia shifted from its main Cold War geopolitical tactics, and began planning "a wide-ranging, multifaceted campaign to attack Western institutions and undermine Western democracies. The clandestine operation was to include cyberattacks, information warfare, propaganda and social media campaigns. Here was the Gerasimov doctrine at work." This observation was made by Michael Isikoff and David Corn in their book, *Russian Roulette - The Inside Story of Putin's War on America and the Election of Donald Trump*.

Enabled by such manipulative ideas, Russian operatives weaponized social media to exploit polarizing wedge issues. Trump's digital media director and campaign manager Brad Parscale adopted similar microtargeting on social media and information warfare tactics to gain power, and in desperate attempts to cling to power.

Woe the fact that the dastardly influence of Vladimir Putin in our elections in 2016 helped give dominating control of

our government to uncompromising deceitful demagogic leaders who vigorously promoted oligarchy by mortgaging the country with irresponsible debt-financed tax cuts. These regressive changes in tax law were pathetically coupled with aggressive efforts to make draconian cuts in social safety net programs and budgets for almost every savvy aspect of civilized society, including cuts in spending related to public education, affordable health care, smart green energy initiatives, sensible social insurance plans, public service-oriented public broadcasting, protections of public lands and the environment, and even funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

"Conservatives" in the United States are not only working hard to impose austerity measures on the masses, but also to bolster corporatocratic power and imperialistic militarism and authoritarian policing and deportation forces, and to sacrifice the global ecological commons and convert Earth's natural resources to cash at the fastest possible rate to goose profits. And they are rigging the de-regulated laissez-faire capitalist economy more and more unfairly, so that a grotesque preponderance of the ill-begotten and artificially maximized profits will continue to be funneled into the unprecedentedly large bank accounts of the richest 1%.

It is unconscionably irresponsible for Republican politicians to have been mainly responsible for running up the national debt by more than \$29 trillion since 1980 with their regressive debt-financed Tax Cut swindles. They rationalize this scheme by trying to sell people on believing in their Trickle-Down economic theory, but this scam is based on a Big Lie. Clearly, what has actually been trickling down since the reign of Ronald Reagan is not propitious benefits and widespread prosperity, but spiking extreme inequities, hard-nosed austerity for poor people, costly levels of debt and poisonous divisions, in addition to poor preparedness and the harmful effects of toxic wastes, polluted air and water, environmental despoliation and depleted natural resources.

Relent, Vladimir Putin and treacherous Republicans! Dante would have consigned you all to spend your afterlives in one or another of the nine circles of his *Inferno* for your greed, abuses of power, propagated harms, deceit and treachery. Look what you have given us. As Professor Robert Reich wrote in 2018, "The GOP under Mr. Trump isn't the first political party to bend its principles to suit political expediency. But it may be the first to jettison its principles entirely, and over so short a time." Surely we should prevent this authority-abusing tribal cult from regaining power, so that we will be able to more definitively pursue greater good goals.

Robert Reich added (in 2018): "If Republicans no longer care about the federal debt, states' rights or Russian aggression, what exactly do they care about? What are the core principles of today's Republican Party?" His answer: "Winning and getting even. But as a year with Mr. Trump as president has shown, this is not a good formula for governing. Most press coverage says that the Republican Party has moved to the right, but this is not exactly accurate. The party has become increasingly sycophantish toward the mercurial Trump, who is altering modern conservatism into his more nationalistic mold and making what was historically a movement of ideas into, mostly, a cult of personality. The conservative party of Republicans is actually decreasingly conservative and increasingly reactionary." This is a decidedly ominous development.

It is stunning that a political party that has abandoned integrity, honesty, fairness, democracy and free and fair elections could possibly have the inside track on retaking power in Congress in the 2022 midterm elections merely because they are so effective at using divisive tactics and manipulating voters' emotions and exploiting tribal identity politics, and scurrilously scaring people, and making the opposition party fail through cynically coldly-calculated obstructionism, and by having illegitimately stacked federal courts with partisan judges who make twisted arguments contending that it is not their job to act as a check and balance on issues like discriminatory gerrymandering and Big Money in election campaigns and lobbying.

Trump treats government "as purely a tribal battle between one side and the other, and expects public servants to put loyalty to him before loyalty to country or the rule of law. Republican congressional leaders should not remain complicit in this debasement," states the Washington Post's Editorial Board.

Let's believe two of Donald Trump's relatives about the man. "He has no principles! None! None!", exclaimed his own sister, the former federal judge Maryanne Trump Barry, in a leaked recording. Any his niece Mary Trump portrays his venality, toxic narcissism and general unfitness in her revealing book *Too Much and Never Enough*.

There is a long list of Trump scandals, but in the big picture they have all been part of a single mega-scam, "the

corruption of the American government by the president and his associates, who are using their official power for personal and financial gain rather than for the welfare of the American people, and their attempts to shield that corruption from political consequences, public scrutiny, or legal accountability." Trump tried to protect himself and his cronies by utilizing "an authoritarian model of law enforcement, where the president personally decides who is prosecuted and who is not, based on his own political agenda". And they strive to shield themselves and their inner circle from legal consequences.

Trump, like run-of-the-mill authoritarians, thought he could get away with deceiving and distracting the people. He regarded himself as being above the rule of law, and refused to be held accountable. He had tweeted before the election. "I will Make Our Government Honest Again -- believe me." That promise turns out to have been colossally dishonest! History will not regard this kindly.

As extreme short-termism and reactionary Trumpism wreak havoc on the world, an opening springs into the spotlight. Heightened risks and declining security for tens of millions of Americans are accompanied, most fortunately, by great opportunities for a revolutionary shift in safer and more providential directions. This new path should be guided by sensible, adaptive, inclusive, green, progressive, sustainable and ecologically sane ideas.

Here is an illuminating understanding from an article titled *Trump is finding it easier to tear down old policies than to build his own*: "After being the 'party of no' during the Obama years, Republicans are still trying to figure out what they want to achieve in this unexpected Trump era -- beyond just rolling back what Obama did. Even some Republicans have raised questions about what the party now stands for, as opposed to what it is against. When Republican Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska was asked during an interview in May 2017 for a Politico podcast what the Republican Party stands for, he responded: 'I don't know.'"

Note to Senator Sasse: Oh, come on! You meant you don't know what moral principles Republicans stand for. But, duh! -- Follow the money! It is obvious what the Republican Party stands for. The top goal of all Republican politicians is to gain and maintain power, regardless of the negative impacts of their hegemony, so that's what they stand for, and it is damnable that they pursue this priority so single-mindedly by pandering excessively to rich people and cash-supercharged corporate entities. After all, what this often means is that the majority of people will be harmed, most folks even in the Republican base will be further disadvantaged, discord will proliferate, the common good will be undermined, the unfolding climate disaster will be exacerbated, overpopulation will compound, and existentially disastrous Tragedy of the Commons outcomes will be facilitated.

Steve Benen, the award-winning producer of *The Rachel Maddow Show*, has written a book titled *The Impostors* that exposes the Republican Party as a gang of fraudsters. "*The Impostors* serves as a devastating indictment of the GOP's breakdown, identifying the culprits, the crisis, and its effects ... Republicans, in a sense, have simply quit governing." As Steve Benen charts in *The Impostors*, the contemporary GOP has become a "post-policy party." Republicans are effectively acting as a gang of impostors who have abandoned their duty to govern, gravely endangering American democracy. They present themselves as officials who are ready to take seriously the substance of problem solving, but their main focus is the pursuit and perpetuation of power by means of stoking culture war anger. "Despite having billed itself as the 'party of ideas', the Republican Party has walked away from the hard but necessary work of policymaking. It is disdainful of expertise and hostile toward evidence and arithmetic. It is tethered to few, if any, meaningful policy preferences. It does not know, and does not care, about how competing proposals should be crafted, scrutinized, or implemented."

Somehow *We the People* chose, by hook or by crook, to make a bargain with the devil, and Donald Trump milked it for all he could get. Authoritarian followers in the MAGA base have enabled this outcome, as made clear by Bob Altemeyer, a now-retired Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Manitoba, who outlined the basic nature of authoritarian followers in his 2006 online book *The Authoritarians*. It is sad that these authoritarian followers have been so willing to go along with Trumpism and "Art of the Bad Deal" fraud. One particularly harmful way Republicans advanced their retrogressive agenda was by getting many partisan right-wing male judges appointed to federal courts, some of whom the American Bar Association deemed "not qualified", and who will often side against poor people, women, gays, racial minorities, immigrants, progressives and environmentalists in favor of corporations, rich people and Trump followers. This, unfortunately for all, has proven to be a self-spiting lose-lose situation.

When the late Senator John McCain once urged his colleagues to reject the torture facilitator Gina Haspel's nomination to lead the CIA, he uttered these thought-provoking words, "as I have argued many times, the methods we employ to keep our nation safe must be as right and just as the values we aspire to live up to and promote in the world." Trump, self-centered, apparently doesn't give a damn about righteousness and justice.

We should make good use of understandings like this, because though inflammatory rhetoric is being used to divide us, we can utilize the resulting passion-stoked energy to transform feeling into remedial action and progressive positive change. Let's seize the moment and turbocharge a new cooperative energy focused on enabling us to better address the sea of troubles in which we find ourselves.

Russia Bolsters Plutocracy and Oligarchy in the USA

Think about the words written by the incisive investigative historian Eric Zuesse in a scientific study titled *The US Is an Oligarchy, Not a Democracy*. The study's opening question about this country was, "Who governs? Who really rules?" The study found the U.S. is no longer a true democracy, but instead a deeply corrupt oligarchy.

Zuesse wrote, "Despite the seemingly strong empirical support in previous studies for theories of majoritarian democracy, our analyses suggest that majorities of the American public actually have little influence over the policies our government adopts. Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance, such as regular elections, freedom of speech and association, and a widespread (if still contested) franchise to vote. But when policy-making is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America's claims to being a democratic society are seriously undermined."

Putin is a saboteur of liberal democracies who began his career as a spy. He was a foreign intelligence officer in the notorious KGB for 16 years before entering politics. But he has engaged in something more diabolical than mere espionage, counterterrorism and intelligence intrigue. He has made sustained efforts to subvert foreign governments by influencing their domestic politics, interfering in their elections, sowing discord, stoking racial antagonisms, demonizing immigrants, giving excess power to treachery by fossil fuel conglomerates, supporting reactionary political parties and schemes to divide people, and engaging in military aggression.

History tells us that Russia and the West have been practicing subversion for a long time, and Russians are said to still be angry over the "Lockhart Plot" incident. This was a big deal in 1917 when Latvian soldiers were paid by the British to launch a counter-coup against the Bolshevik government. Bolshevik revolutionaries had capitalized on the successful February Revolution of 1917 against Tsarist autocracy by staging their own armed insurrection in Petrograd. Led by Vladimir Lenin, they won a triumphant October Revolution, and then British operatives allegedly tried to assassinate Lenin in an attempt at regime change sanctioned by the British government (though this is still denied). The Bolshevik government reacted to this plot by strengthening its secret police to protect against outside interference, and by sending spies abroad to discern the plans and possibly evil intentions of others. We are paying a steep price for this totalitarian reaction in the USA today, and Russia has played a dastardly role in upsetting our domestic tranquility by helping Trump gain power and influence.

Lenin blamed the First World War on capitalism, contending rather convincingly that it was the workers who suffered the most in wars, while profiteering industrialists and weapons manufacturers and other collaborating capitalists made money at a terrible expense to the people, opportunistically profiting from the severe perils suffered by the working class. The First World War caused horrible hardships in Russia, so Lenin sued for peace and pulled Russia out of the war. As a result of the treaty that ended the war in Eastern Europe, the aggressor Germans moved men from the Eastern Front to the Western Front, and the massive influx of soldiers greatly worried the leaders of armed forces on the Western Front. That's presumed to be why they sought to get Russia back into the war through the Lockhart Plot to assassinate Lenin.

Fast forward 99 years, and the Republican reaction to Russian subversive efforts in 2016 was actually to encourage it. When offered "dirt" on Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump Jr. declared, "I love it." Republicans wanted desperately to grab power and thereby push their controlling, unjust, anti-egalitarian, progress undermining, public debt-financed tax cutting, anti-democratic and anti-environmental agenda. This subversive Russian interference was thus a conspiracy against the American people. Robert Mueller provided an elaborate view of this intrigue. These same Republican con artists and others like Trump's third Attorney General Bill Barr deceitfully spun the Mueller investigation in denial of

the many scandalous schemes that took place. They claimed Trump to be above the law and too busy, despite all the time he spends watching TV and on golfing vacations, supposedly trying to Make America Great Again, but in some perplexingly counterproductive bizarre ways. No one should be above the law in our democracy, and especially not in attempts to get elected, or when engaging in treachery or numerous instances of financial malfeasance.

While the British failed in their alleged plot to assassinate Lenin, Vladimir Putin got a measure of revenge by succeeding in imposing a ruthless Republican regime on the people of the U.S. with an illegitimate puppet leader who has "conservatives" in Congress cowed, compliant and complicit. *We the People* must stand up and reject this illegitimate influence! With the triumph of so many Democratic candidates in the House in November 2018, the bright light of honest examination of Republican skullduggery made the years since then tumultuous.

Vladimir Putin regards global geopolitical strife as a zero-sum game, according to Michael Isikoff and David Corn in *Russian Roulette*. Putin regards the United States as trying to impose a "unipolar" world on Russia and other nations, and he blamed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for turmoil in Russia after many protestors took to the streets alleging vote fraud after Russia's elections in December 2011. Putin used this occasion to crack down on dissidents and stir up nationalistic fervor to gain support -- and to engage in a somewhat low cost campaign to torpedo Hillary Clinton's candidacy and get Trump elected. And Putin has since then eliminated most of his political opponents, like Alexei Navalny, in mercilessly lawless actions many Republicans want to emulate.

Big Money Is Having Destructive Impacts

Worse than the Russians, some say, is the nefarious influence of the "Kochtopus". This is an evocative name given to the billionaire Koch brothers and their network of cronies, "which for more than six decades has helped to finance and cultivate the ideological uprising that has now, at long last, established itself at the very heart of Republican power." Why was it, again, that God kept hardening the Pharaoh's heart?

Billionaires in the Koch network were responsible for having cunningly riled up reactive populists in 2009 to support the agenda of the rich soon after President Obama took office. They co-opted populist passions and channeled them into fervent support for an agenda that was broadly detrimental to the populists themselves. During congressional recesses in the hot summer of 2009, they seized the opportunity to fool millions of Americans into vocally protesting against the Black man in the White House and his efforts to expand healthcare coverage in the country. Protestors spouted some absurd talking points about "death panels" and socialism, and thus began a decade of vituperative attacks against expanded health insurance, Medicaid, the Affordable Care Act and Planned Parenthood.

"The Tea Party was perhaps the ultimate expression of the power of a wealthy few to channel the GOP base's populist instincts and undifferentiated rage at the country's first black president toward the preferred policy outcomes of the rich -- and even to stir demands by citizens for the repeal of their own healthcare."

The Koch organization announced it would spend \$400 million to influence 2018 election outcomes, partially as a thank you for the huge tax cuts the Republican Party gave them. They stated that they want "to change the trajectory of this country." Bernie Sanders' gave an astute explanation: "The Koch brothers are the extreme right-wing 'libertarian' family. They are the third wealthiest family in the country -- worth some \$120 billion. They also, unbelievably, have more political power than either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party."

By abusing the power of their unwarranted and corrupting influence, these billionaires are gaining more than \$1 billion every year in tax breaks from the Republican tax cut bill, financed by borrowing money from every taxpayer in every future year. So the Kochs could easily have paid the entire \$400 million on the 2018 elections out of their own pockets and still came out way ahead. This is dastardly corruption incarnate, and it is made vastly worse by the degree of harm that the agenda they are pushing is having on working people, the health of the natural world, the stability of the global climate, and the survival prospects of other forms of life. Some of their specific goals are to privatize Social Security, Medicare, public education and the Department of Veterans Affairs. They even want to repeal almost every piece of major legislation designed to protect working people, the elderly, children, the sick, the poor and the environment health that has been enacted since the 1930s.

Bernie Sanders confirmed that the U.S. is becoming an oligarchy, partly due to the Supreme Court's narrow and extremely partisan *Citizens United* ruling. He pointed out, "we see one family not only making huge campaign

contributions, but establishing think tanks, appointing university chairs and creating a number of organizations in almost every sphere of American political life. Their goal: to make the very rich richer at the expense of everyone else." Their strategies inimically include holding down the pay of working people, undermining the collective bargaining rights of workers, and giving corporate entities bigger opportunities to socialize health and pollution costs, and exploit public lands. Another of their nefarious schemes is to torpedo public transportation systems in the USA as an offshoot of their longstanding national crusade for lower taxes, smaller government and maximized profits for industries like those that produce oil, coal, natural gas and vehicles.

The early muckraking writer Frank Norris ended the first evocative chapter of his novel *The Octopus* with the sudden appearance of a lone locomotive bursting onto the scene, startling the perambulating protagonist in California's Central Valley and scaring him to attention out of a reverie. The speeding train engine was a "terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon." The observer then imagined seeing the railroad engine "as a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path (it had barreled through a herd of sheep moments earlier, crushing many of them); the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus." The Railroad monopoly!

The Kochtopus is less dramatic, but far more harmfully impactful on the lives of countless millions of people. The vast wealth and political influence of the Koch network of billionaires have been a driving force behind an influential organization of system-corrupting rich people that has worked assiduously to get politicians to cut their taxes, corrupt our democratic processes, severely skew our democratic decision making, rigidly control working people, eliminate regulations that protect the environment, and in general distort our national priorities.

Fortunately, a study of history reveals that there have been many dark moments since 1776 when the politics of fear have been prevalent in the USA, yet the "better angels of our nature" have won the day. Jon Meacham provides many examples of this trend throughout American history in his compelling book *The Soul of American: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. Now is the time to begin again to head in the right direction!

A Riff on Inheritance Taxes

A century ago, the American people were living in a Gilded Age of ostentatious wealth and dizzying inequality. It was "wealth against commonwealth", as muckraker Henry Demarest Lloyd described it. In this context, Republican President Theodore Roosevelt recommended an estate tax as a means to keep wealth from being concentrated in dynastic fortunes. Roosevelt was an upper class patrician who used the wealth he inherited to lead a life of honorable public service rather than a life of leisure, and he always believed that the transmission of enormous wealth to heirs "does not do them any real service and is of great and genuine detriment to the community at large." What really mattered, he felt, was to have a national community based on citizens' political equality and relative economic equality and fair-dealing interdependence. Inheritance taxes were thus a moral issue for Roosevelt, as well as an economic issue.

"The really big fortune", said Roosevelt in his New Nationalism Speech (1910), "the swollen fortune, by the mere fact of its size, acquires qualities which differentiate it in kind, as well as in degree, from what is possessed by men of relatively small means. Therefore, I believe in a graduated income tax on big fortunes, and in another tax which is far more easily collected and far more effective: that is, a graduated inheritance tax on big fortunes, properly safeguarded against evasion, and increasing rapidly in amount with the size of the estate."

One main reason for the estate tax was to mitigate the grave threat posed by concentrated wealth and political power to our nation's fragile experiment in self-governing democracy. The voices calling for taxes on inherited wealth at the time ranged from rural populist farmers and urban reformers to enlightened industrialists. Rich industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie observed, "Of all forms of taxation, this seems the wisest."

In 1935, Franklin D. Roosevelt took up this crusade, striking out at great fortunes for both moral and economic reasons. "The transmission from generation to generation of vast fortunes by will, inheritance or gift is not consistent with the ideals and sentiments of the American people," he stated. "Inherited economic power is as inconsistent with the ideals of this generation as inherited political power was inconsistent with the ideals of the generation which established our Government."

Only two-tenths of one percent of Americans have a net worth large enough to owe any estate tax at all upon their deaths, under current tax law. This is only two out of every 1,000 people! Elitist policies that set low estate tax rates make it abundantly clear that tax laws are among *the most politically determined laws of all*, given the lavishly generous treatment of rich people after they die, and of the money their children inherit.

Since 1980, regressive changes in taxation in the U.S. have given wealthy people huge sums of money, and this unaffordable largess has been rashly financed by borrowing trillions of dollars from people in all future years. The top tax rate each and every year from 1936 to 1980 was 70% or higher. Then Ronald Reagan began a radical experiment of regressive changes in taxation in 1981, cutting the marginal tax rate from 70% to 28% by 1988. This abuse of influence has been one of the main mechanisms by which wealth has been increasingly concentrated in the hands of the wealthiest. Some of the worst and most socially undesirable consequences of this undemocratic concentration of wealth have been a dangerous increase in inequality in American society, and a risk-laden piling up of national debt. This is accompanied by unnecessary financing pressures and austerity measures that constrain investments in common good goals like improved public education, infrastructure, a strong social safety net, and protections of public lands, National Parks and a healthy environment.

The basic ways that our economic and political systems are corrupted to favor the wealthy are examined in *Assessment: The Top Ten Ways Our System Is Unfairly Rigged*. And the excessively consequential impacts of this corruption are examined in *Thirteen Main Methods Used to Increasingly Concentrate Wealth and Power*.

Republicans in Congress want to not only abolish inheritance taxes but also to weaken progressive income taxes. The American people should be hearing meaningful debate on taxing vast fortunes, and voices of moral outrage at the anti-egalitarian status quo should inspire passionate reminders of the American ideal of equality.

The 105th anniversary of the estate tax occurred in September 2021. Now is a good time to assess our present inequalities, and to strive to reverse them. The persons on the Forbes 400 list of wealthiest Americans today have as much wealth as more than 60% of U.S. households. And in the first half of the 2016 presidential election, half of all campaign contributions came from only 158 wealthy families. Given this corruption of our politics by Big Money, former President Jimmy Carter declared that the U.S. was becoming an oligarchy, and studies of social mobility reveal how the excessive concentration of wealth undermines equality of opportunity.

The estate tax has been under siege since 1997, when a number of dynastically wealthy families began investing millions of dollars to save themselves billions by financing anti-tax lobbying groups and slick communications targeted to rebrand estate taxes as "death taxes." The estate tax has historically raised substantial revenue from those with the greatest capacity to pay. Even in its weakened condition today, it will raise something like \$300 billion every decade entirely from households in the top one tenth of one percent. "But revenue has always been a secondary consideration with the estate tax. Its primary purpose historically has been to put a brake on the build-up of concentrated wealth and the threat that this poses to our democratic institutions. The estate tax remains a piñata for anti-tax GOP politicians, and almost all of them want to repeal it. But we should move in the opposite direction by closing loopholes and instituting a more progressive rate structure."

Gerrymandering -- Let's Strengthen Our Democracy!

Gerrymandering allows Republican politicians to impose their extremist policies on the American people, skewing tax policy radically in favor of increasing the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few and undermining the social safety net, and sacrificing protections of the environment to natural resource exploiters, and depriving women of reproductive rights. This trend is seriously exacerbating inequalities, inequities and injustices in American society today, making "the land of the free" into a place where laws and public policies are too often antithetical to making our nation one that has "liberty and justice for all."

When we clearly see Republicans striving to win elections by tortuously gerrymandering congressional districts and passing state laws to restrict voting rights, it would be reasonable to conclude that a basic reason they do this is because they cannot win based on the force of the reasonableness of their ideas and national plans.

Gerrymandering involves "packing and cracking" people into contorted congressional districts in ways that make an increasing number of House districts uncompetitive. This causes trends toward political extremism to become more entrenched. As a result, threats to incumbents are greater from opponents in primary elections that are even more

radical or reactionary to the left or right, rather than from opposition party candidates in general elections. There are highly negative consequences as the populace becomes increasingly polarized. Bipartisan problem solving is made more difficult, and the ability of honest and responsible representatives to enact needed reforms is reduced, along with efforts to root out political corruption. And collegial collaboration is torpedoed, with deceitful abusers of authority given more sway, and there are subversive impacts against all the positive purposes that the framers of the U.S. Constitution aspired to, as set forth in its Preamble.

Republicans more than doubled their control of state legislatures in the U.S. between 2010 and 2018, allowing them to control both legislative chambers in a record 32 states. Using this influence, they are gerrymandering congressional districts after the 2020 Census in such a biased and contorted manner as to give decidedly unfair over-representation to partisans who control redistricting processes. This has resulted in under-representation of the interests of many people, especially progressives, liberals and people in racial minorities. Such exercises of extreme partisanship in drawing gerrymandered districts constitute an egregious abuse of power, especially because it is done to disenfranchise the majority of Americans.

The House of Representatives and the federal government have been corrupted by this practice of partisan gerrymandering to give an overwhelming preference to "conservatives" and their excessively narrowly-focused agenda. The evidence of this is convincing. In Wisconsin, after Republicans redrew electoral maps of the state in 2011 using "the most precise technology available to dissect new Census Bureau data and convert it into reliably Republican districts", Republicans captured a 60-to-39 seat advantage in the State Assembly -- even though they got less than 50% of the vote statewide.

Federal courts have declared extreme partisan gerrymanders unconstitutional in states like North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio. This makes it wrong for partisan conservatives on the Supreme Court to have found narrow technical grounds to allow the corrupted status quo to continue when they ruled in 2019 that it is the responsibility of Congress to pass laws that constrain extreme unfairness in gerrymandering. While Congress definitely should do this, Republicans in both the House and Senate are inalterably opposed to such fair reforms, so it is a cynical Catch-22 under current circumstances for the legislative branch of the federal government to be expected to thwart unfair representation because it is so corrupted by politicians who win mainly due to gerrymandering and voter restrictions that violate provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which prohibited state legislatures with demonstrated histories of discrimination against Black and other oppressed minority groups from passing state laws that disadvantage such groups.

This is a compelling reason why new legislation must be passed to make representation fairer in all states, like that passed by Democrats in 2021 that would properly reform voting rights. This legislation is staunchly opposed by Republicans in the Senate who have repeatedly used the filibuster to prevent this anti-corruption legislation from even being debated. Time is running out for Democrats in Congress to pass such needed reforms to make representation fairer. This should be done now by eliminating the filibuster for voting rights.

The Supreme Court should have honored the crucial importance of checks and balances in the government by rightly ruling that it is unconstitutionally unfair for state legislatures to engage in extreme partisanship by drawing contorted congressional districts for political advantages. A fair-minded ruling would strengthen voting rights and make our democracy fairer by forcing politicians to compete more honestly for votes, rather than illegitimately winning elections and having a dominating influence in a gerrymandered Congress.

A three-judge District Court had unanimously found that the Republican-controlled state of Texas had drawn district maps in 2018 with the intent to preserve racial discrimination, but then the Supreme Court overruled this decision in a ruling tainted by a 5-4 vote that featured the politically partisan Neil Gorsuch as the deciding vote. This meant that, "after years of litigation and undeniable proof of intentional discrimination, minority voters in Texas -- despite constituting a majority of the population of the State -- will continue to be underrepresented in the political process." In 2021, the Justice Department sued the state of Texas for its latest outrageously discriminatory redistricting.

Following a similar playbook they used after the 2010 Census, Republicans are gerrymandering congressional districts after the 2020 Census to gain unfair influence. Some of the worst instances of this corrupt influence that diminishes democratic fairness are taking place in Alabama, North Carolina and Texas. Republicans in Alabama are cheating Black people out of fair representation by drawing districts so that they have majority influence in only one of seven

districts, despite the fact that they are 27% of the population. The Supreme Court took up a shadow docket case in February 2022 in which the illegitimately constituted majority of conservatives on the court ruled that Republicans could continue engaging in disenfranchisement until the political partisans on the court decide at a later date on the merits of this brazen discrimination.

In North Carolina, the Republican-controlled state legislature passed congressional maps for the next decade that are blatant gerrymanders targeted to silence the voices of millions. These redistricting boundaries were drawn with surgical precision to give Republicans an advantage in 10 of 14 total congressional seats, despite party registration in North Carolina being basically split 50-50. The state Supreme Court struck down the maps on 2/4/22 because they were "unconstitutional beyond a reasonable doubt." In Texas, Republicans are engaging in corruption incarnate not only by creating extreme gerrymanders but also by passing restrictive new voting laws. The state now has 29 million residents, an increase of almost 4 million since 2010 -- and of this increase in population, 95% are Hispanic, Black and Asian. Yet Republicans in the Texas House gerrymandered to REDUCE the number of districts in which these groups of minority voters will be the majority from 40 to 36 districts, while the number of districts in which Anglo voters will be the majority will be increased to 89 districts from 83. This packing of minority groups into a minimum number of districts and creating a maximum number of White districts constitutes a racist disenfranchisement of minority voters. Again, this contributes to increasing polarization and extremism, and has negative consequences for most Texans -- and Americans.

A Collateral Overview - Economics for a Sustainable World

John Fowles once made it trenchantly clear how necessary it is for capitalist economic systems to auspiciously adapt as rapid change occurs. In *The Aristos*, he succinctly wrote, "Capitalism contains the seeds of its own transformation. And it is high time it started to nurture those seeds." He was thinking of such things as harsh injustices and inequities, spiritually bankrupt excessive materialism, wastefulness and myopic ecological harms.

Perhaps "solidarity economics" is an idea whose time has come. This may have started with an idea expressed at the World Social Forum that "another world is possible". Applying this concept to economics, the idea posits that it is possible to organize economies around fairer principles that are much different from those that characterize global capitalism today. We must reform disaster capitalism to save it from itself!

The fact of the matter is that even admired companies are excessively obsessed with profits at the expense of the greater good. Facebook, for instance, for big fees, helped optimize its platform for Republicans in 2016, and the company gets billions of dollars of advertising income by facilitating the propagation of falsehoods, "fake news", disinformation, fear mongering, conspiracy theories and defamatory attacks. And Apple has evaded huge sums of taxes for years, hiding them abroad from 2005 through 2018 like countless other corporate entities, in wait for the next time Republicans would gain control and allow them to repatriate the money at cheap tax rates and primarily benefit CEOs and the biggest shareholders.

The former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, an expert in economics, asserts that capitalism is going to make itself obsolete through an increased prevalence of robotics, artificial intelligence and mechanization. He warned that Karl Marx "will have his revenge", saying technology is going to "destroy a lot more jobs than it creates", and that capitalism will undermine itself as technology companies make other businesses obsolete.

The pandemic is drastically accelerating this jobs crisis. Professor Varoufakis said current systems will prove to be unsustainable due to the stunning fact that all the developed nations on Earth will experience high rates of job losses in many industries within the next 20 years due to technological advances in automation, artificial intelligence, the use of robots and other labor-eliminating practices, according to an assessment made in 2013 by Carl Frey and Michael Osborne of Oxford University. Since more than 40 percent of jobs in many industries could be eliminated in the next two decades, Varoufakis says governments must deal with the extremely destabilizing impacts of this transformation by enacting serious redistributive policies. One good way they could do this, says the economist, is to put 10% of all future issues of shares into a "common welfare fund", which would be owned by the people. From this fund a "universal basic dividend" could be paid to every citizen. This idea, remarkably, is similar in intent and impact to a global wealth tax recommended by Thomas Piketty in his incisive tome, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*." Let's give serious consideration to such ideas.

The Shrewd Exploitation of Political Dishonesty

The unfolding "news cycle" is practically overwhelming, buffeted by a cyclone of tweets, inflammatory rhetoric, manipulative spin, conflicting viewpoints, propagated disinformation and "fake news". Competing news networks on TV and online are interpreting scandalous developments to suit partisan agendas, but the astonishing tsunami of revelations and distractions are beginning to clarify into a tangible thread that should make it clear what needs to be done to remedy the threats that face the American people, and all of humanity.

Honest journalism is a great strength of democratic self-governance, and is crucial to the greater good. Trump made blatantly self-serving efforts to discredit those who revealed the widespread malfeasance of his regime. Journalists are the true patriots, NOT "the enemy of the people", despite what Trump has repeatedly asserted, echoing many dictators and autocrats over the course of the last century who have used such deceitful charges to delegitimize opposing voices and cripple the power of dissenters.

Meanwhile, Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity and others on Fox News coddle the maniacally narcissistic dishonest rogue, helping advance his agenda, no matter how rationally indefensible -- and possibly increase the chances he will return to power. So a thoughtful degree of objectivity and Big Picture perspective is needed to sort out the competing narratives, and I, Dr. Tiffany B. Twain, aspire to provide such perspective in this manifesto.

Fake news is false information that has three main characteristics: It is factually inaccurate, is often framed in demagogic ways that are emotionally manipulative, and is optimized to be insidiously propagated by being shared on Facebook or other social media websites. Trump frequently tweeted about FAKE NEWS, before he was banned from the Twitter platform for violating rules, but what he meant is real different. He co-opted the term to apply to any news that reflects negatively on him, his self-serving motives, his dishonesty, his character flaws or the anti-democratic nature of his unjust policies and manipulative behaviors.

Many Republican politicians win their election contests partially by exploiting fears, stoking prejudices and propagating false narratives, deceitful spin and conspiracy theories forwarded on Facebook and other social media sites to millions of people. Trump ironically charges that news stories are fake just because he doesn't like what they say, no matter how valid. Contrary to his claims, a news story is not fake simply because it is critical or inconvenient. It is not fake news merely because it calls into question a set of beliefs that some people cling to with fervent conviction. "It is not fake just because it's rejected by those in power. In fact, many of these are signs that the reporter is onto something."

The lies Trump tells are unbelievable. The Washington Post Fact Checker identified more than 30,000 false or misleading claims -- lies or distortions of truth -- during his tenure in office. One of the most preposterous lies Trump told was in regard to Robert Mueller and his fellow Special Counsel investigators: "TOTAL WITCH HUNT", he repeatedly proclaimed, despite the number of cronies found guilty around him. Right, right, right -- Trump is as innocent as driven snow. And say, what a sensational turn-around it would be, if this were actually true, from the decidedly sordid details of his entire conniving career. Read more about it in the book *Dark Towers: Deutsche Bank, Donald Trump, and an Epic Trail of Destruction*.

Tim O'Brien, the Executive Editor of Bloomberg Opinion, provocatively tweeted, "Worth noting the obvious: President Trump is using the same tactics against law enforcement, intelligence agencies, civil service and the judiciary that he deploys against the media -- trying to discredit all of them so institutions that question or check his power are undermined." To more fully understand this, see *The 15 Warning Signs of Tyranny* that Professor Robert Reich articulated just before Trump took office.

According to John Feeley, a former Ambassador to Panama, Trump has "warped and betrayed the traditional core values of the United States." John Feeley indicated that he was dismayed by the Trump administration's hostility to diplomacy, so he resigned and wrote an op-ed in the Washington Post titled *Why I Could No Longer Serve This President*. Something like 60% of the highest ranking diplomats in the State Department left their positions, and the void was so notable that when Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was fired in March 2018, eight of the ten most senior positions at the State Department still had not been filled, "leaving no one in charge of arms control, human rights, trade policy, or the environment." John Feeley had been a Foreign Service officer for 27 years, and like his peers, he advocates an ethos of non-partisan service. Yet he saw it as too dangerous for the U.S. to cede its diplomatic

leadership in the world, saying, "We're not just walking off the field. We're taking the ball and throwing a finger at the rest of the world."

Additionally, Trump offended U.S. allies with his bans on travelers from Muslim-majority countries, political bait-and-switch schemes with regard to the young immigrant Dreamers, strident calls for a wall on the Mexican border, withdrawals from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Climate Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, and his offensive attacks on allies like Justin Trudeau in Canada, as well as his cozying up to repressive authoritarians in many countries abroad. In addition, his heartless policy of separating children from their parents caused widespread moral indignation, because as the UN human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein declared, it is "government-sanctioned child abuse" that will cause "irreparable harm." Al-Hussein added, "I am deeply concerned by recently adopted policies which punish children for their parents' actions. The thought that any state would seek to deter parents by inflicting such abuse on children is unconscionable."

Feeley sensed that Trump saw every critic as a threat, and that his first instinct was to annihilate such perceived threats. "He's like a velociraptor," he said. "He has to be boss, and if you don't show him deference, he kills you." The emotionally impaired Trumpster seems to regard every opponent as an enemy, so his narcissistically hyper-insecure reaction is to try to vanquish and humiliate anyone who objects to his tirades or criticizes his rash or immoral actions. No one should be so brainwashed or blindly loyal to cultish tribal identity with Trump as to go along with the ruses he engaged in, and continues to manifest.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions spoke in June 2018 in Fort Wayne, Indiana to a group that included many law enforcement officers and others in the community. He directly addressed "religious leaders" and "church friends", and stated, "Illegal entry into the United States is a crime -- as it should be. Persons who violate the law of our nation are subject to prosecution. I would cite you to the apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13 to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order." Wow, really -- God supports the government, right or wrong?!

This tortured reading of the biblical passage in Romans 13 to justify "zero-tolerance" policies that separate children from their parents as families seek to enter the United States "is exactly the strained interpretation that others have used before to justify slavery, segregation, apartheid and Nazism. The same interpretation could be used to justify Joseph Stalin, or Kim Jong Un." One observer wrote, "A more complete reading and understanding of Romans 13 -- and the Bible more broadly -- reveals more love and care for neighbors and immigrants than Attorney General Jeff Sessions would have us believe."

The White House press secretary at the time, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, was asked about these remarks. She said: "It is very biblical to enforce the law." A sensible observer noted, "This isn't religion. It's perversion. It is not the creed of a democratic government or political party, but of an authoritarian cult."

Here's what we should do. Let's flatter the Trumpster by giving him a Special Oscar for his Outstanding Performance in the role of deceitful narcissistic hard-nosed immigrant-scapegoating blame-shifting demagogic con man who triumphantly manipulated the populace with surreal evil genius and ruled with deviousness, cunning swindles, scandalous malfeasance, blatant cronyism, unprecedented eagerness to cozy up to ruthless dictators, corrupt nepotism, unfair policies and retrograde anti-environmental priorities. Let's give recognition to his success in his larger-than-life arrogance and impressive toxic avalanche of twittering madness and the chaotic administration of the government to which he subjected the American people.

And then let's declare him disqualified from ever again holding public office for his having incited thousands of insurrectionists against Congress on January 6, in accordance with the stipulations of the 14th Amendment.

Consider this illuminating thing. The Grifter-in-Chief brazenly used his charitable Trump Foundation for purposes that were both improper and illicit. Under the pretense of raising money for organizations that were tax-exempt like veterans groups, Trump collected millions of dollars and then engaged in what the then Solicitor General of New York Barbara Underwood called, in a civil suit against him, "persistent illegal conduct, occurring over more than a decade, that includes extensive unlawful political coordination with the Trump presidential campaign, repeated and willful self-dealing transactions to benefit Mr. Trump's personal and business interests, and violations of basic legal obligations for non-profit foundations." Barbara Underwood also sent referral letters to the Internal Revenue Service and

Federal Election Commission in June 2018 for them to make an investigation of violations of federal law, and for legal action by those agencies. Trump as usual deceitfully attacked back, falsely claiming that "sleazy New York Democrats" were suing him without any good purpose.

The Trump Foundation was a private charitable organization started by Donald Trump in 1987 with money he made from his best-selling book, *The Art of the Deal*. Up until about 2005, the foundation was primarily funded by Trump himself, but after that it was bankrolled almost exclusively by donations from his associates and friends. Unethical and illegal uses of the fund resulted in a \$2 million fine and a court order for it to cease operations in 2019. Ten years earlier, in 2009, the Trump Foundation gave \$100,000 to the Clinton Foundation, hoping to curry favor. The Clinton Foundation, despite right-wing attacks on it, is a more reputable charitable foundation that has done a lot of real good in the world, including having reportedly saved millions of lives.

The Trump family has been involved in bigger schemes than cheating on their charity. Special Counsel Robert Mueller assembled a formidable all-star team of expert investigators and lawyers to get to the bottom of Russian interference in our elections and other malfeasance. These lawyers, combined, possess a vast array of experience investigating financial fraud, corruption, money laundering, foreign bribery and organized crime, and they secured many indictments or guilty pleas. And Trump's ex-campaign chairman Paul Manafort was sent to jail for witness tampering. This makes it clear that Republican assertions that the investigation was a "Witch Hunt" are patently preposterous, and their obstruction of justice and refusals to honor subpoenas are wrong.

The whole "witch hunt" assertions are part of Republican attempts to protect Trump and his minions from being found guilty of wrongdoing. As "60 Minutes" correspondent Lesley Stahl has said, Trump admitted to her that he attacks the press as part of a strategy to discredit reporters and news organizations so that he will be shielded from negative coverage. This negative coverage, which he inaccurately calls "fake news", is earned and richly deserved, and journalists should be commended for striving to protect our democracy by shedding light on these compulsive schemes and efforts to distract the people from the malfeasance that is going on.

The rest of this essay examines the legacy being left to the American people by the treacherous subversion of our politics by the likes of Donald Trump, Mitch McConnell and Vladimir Putin.

One Dastardly Result of Politicians Pandering to Giant Corporations

The Republican Party has become "dangerously extreme" in its denials of climate science. This ideological denial is both cowardly and highly risky. Economist Paul Krugman assessed the ramifications in a December 2015 article: "I'd urge everyone outside the climate-denial bubble to frankly acknowledge the awesome and terrifying reality. We're looking at a party -- the Republican Party -- that has turned its back on science at a time when doing so puts the very future of civilization at risk. That's the truth, and it needs to be faced head-on."

According to Nathaniel Rich, the climate crisis is an unfolding tragedy, but it is also a crime, "a thing bad people knowingly made worse, for their personal gain. That, I suspect, is one of the many aspects to the climate change battle that posterity will find it hard to believe, and impossible to forgive."

Consider this in the context of the Know Nothing attitude Trump Republicans display when slashing funding for NASA's Carbon Monitoring System and other valuable scientific understandings, and of the anti-intellectual scams of people like former Florida Governor Rick Scott and their efforts to suppress knowledge by prohibiting mention of the words climate change in official state business.

Trump's arrogant and extraordinarily myopic renunciation of the Paris Climate Agreement is a blatant refusal to responsibly work together with leaders in all other nations on Earth to address one of the biggest existential challenges ever faced by human beings. Bold climate action and true climate justice are needed now!

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who upset a prominent Democratic incumbent in a June 2018 primary when she was just 28 years old, easily defeated her Republican opponent in that November's elections in an overwhelmingly Democratic district. Alexandria has a degree in economics, and progressive sensibilities, and she has outlined plans to lead the United States in a transition to a 100% renewable energy system by the year 2035. "It's a goal hailed by environmentalists as the last best hope of staving off the most catastrophic effects of human-caused planetary warming, and it's one already adopted by a coalition of mayors representing 42 percent of U.S. electricity use and

representing major cities such as Atlanta and St. Louis."

What sets Ocasio-Cortez's proposal apart was her plan to meet the target by implementing what she called a "Green New Deal," a federal plan to spur "the investment of trillions of dollars and the creation of millions of high-wage jobs." This slogan harks back to President Franklin Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal program of labor reforms and infrastructure spending. Alexandria compared the program she envisions to the tens of billions of dollars spent on the rebuilding of Europe after World War II.

"The Green New Deal we are proposing will be similar in scale to the mobilization efforts seen in World War II or the Marshall Plan," she told HuffPost by email. "We must again invest in the development, manufacturing, deployment, and distribution of energy, but this time green energy." She has suggested that storm-ravaged Puerto Rico, still struggling to regain reliable electricity long after the deadliest hurricane in modern U.S. history, could be a testing ground for such a policy. She indicated, "Our fellow Americans on the island have suffered horrendous losses and need investment at a scale that only the American government can provide."

Since the top Republican goal is to gain power no matter what means they have to use, Republicans show little concern for the negative consequences. The bottom line of their objective is to get control and money, no matter how harmful the impacts of their abuses of power, no matter how deceitful their tactics, and no matter how seriously they hurt people and undermine the common good. The proof of this contention is found in their shrewd double-crossing of their blue-collar supporters, their zeal to cut food stamps and social security safety net programs while giving tax breaks to the highest income earners and the wealthiest people, and their ready willingness to betray the best interests of the American people and their healthcare and economic security and the decidedly providential soundness of the environmental underpinnings of our overall well-being.

Trump as a candidate made the preposterous assertion that he alone could fix the problems afflicting our country. He bombastically promised over and over again at emotion-whipped rallies that he would "drain the swamp" in Washington D.C. He claimed he had plans to make sweeping ethics reforms, and he declared he would get rid of corrupt political insiders, and eliminate government waste of public funds, and he actually did pledge to "make our government honest once again." This "charade of shenanigans" was an epic farce!

Donald Trump is the last person to trust to fix the problems we face. Take immigration issues. In June 2018, the Trump administration refused to take responsibility for outrage-provoking "zero tolerance" policies that separate children from their parents, and Trump said Congress should fix the problem. He not only used vulnerable children as bargaining chips to try to get Congress to authorize spending billions of dollars to build a wall between the United States and Mexico, but he also embraced immigration policies driven by his chief policy advisor Stephen Miller, who demonstrated "instance after instance of bigotry, xenophobia and homophobia" during his time as a student at Santa Monica High School. One student said Miller had "an intense hatred toward people of color, especially toward Latinos." Another student who had attended elementary through high school with Miller called him "an unabashed racist", and said that "he was constantly making disparaging remarks about the African American, Latino, and Asian students at our school."

And Trump will "make our government honest once again"? That was a cynical lie! This assertion was part of a colossal Big Lie, for all along and indeed throughout his career, he has been the antichrist of rectitude, a cheater and pathological liar, and his egomaniacal greed for money and power made it clear that he would engage in crass self-dealing and fill his Cabinet with schemers, Wall Street robber barons and other insiders who have blatant unmitigated conflicts of interest in personal enrichment and the advancement of their own careers.

Let's demand that our representatives implement common good solutions to all the big problems we face! Good solutions abound, and they would be simple, though not easy to implement. Why are our representatives not taking honorable steps to help solve the biggest of our national and international challenges? Ah, yes, of course: such progress is being blocked by corrupt pandering politicians because their top priorities are to get financial support, advance their own self-interest, satisfy their ambitions and enhance their own fortunes.

The reason that solutions are not easy to put into effect is because the hubris-filled domineering few refuse to compromise, and they insist on imposing their wills upon the masses. They are making out like bandits from the Tax Cuts scam, excessive profiteering and cost externalizing gambits. Too, they are grabbing excessively unfair political

representation in their favor, and using deceit, demagoguery, fear mongering, divisive ploys, huge sums of advertising money, and the exploitation of workers' insecurities and vulnerabilities to impose anti-egalitarian national priorities. And they are staunchly opposing fair-minded collective bargaining rights and environmental protections by making anti-democratic efforts to torpedo progressive plans and politicians.

As American politics has become unreasonably dominated by the reactionary right, it is provoking more powerful passions for honest and effective solutions to the big problems that affect us all. When governmental control in the U.S. was seized by Trump Republicans kowtowing to wealthy people and corporate interests, our national policies lurched backwards, making our country less fair, more discriminatory, more disdainful of public health and safety, and more favorable to excess profiteering, especially by fossil fuel exploiters, health insurance companies, drug manufacturers and corporations involved in gun sales and the military-industrial complex.

A much better prescription for our overall health and well-being would be for all voters to demand more honest representatives, less corruption, and more honorable representatives who really demonstrate an overarching concern for the greater good. We need national policies that place higher values on precautionary principles, conservation and sustainability, and that are not opposed to conserving resources and generating clean energy.

Knowledge, not ignorance, is the key to human well-being and long-term prosperity. Unfortunately, conservative politicians are trying to slash funding for accurate knowledge on consequential issues like climate science, gun safety, environmental protections and research and development in many government agencies.

Deceit by climate change deniers does not override the laws of physics and probability, and the truth of scientific evidence is not diminished by denial. Neil deGrasse Tyson gives us a valid point: "The good thing about science is that it's true whether or not you believe in it." Demagoguery cannot indefinitely triumph over reason, and the Age of Enlightenment cannot long be suspended by cultivating fear and division and abusing power. "Expertise, personal integrity and public service have all been debased and devalued in our dominant culture. That's how we wound up, for the first time in American history, with a president who had no prior governing or military experience but lots of liabilities that would have crippled previous candidates."

The Trump administration systematically rolled back consumer protections that could affect most aspects of Americans' spending habits. According to Washington Post reporters, "At the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, for example, enforcement actions have dropped from an average of three-to-five each month during the past four years down to zero since a Trump appointee took charge of the agency in late November 2017. The Labor Department has delayed full implementation of a rule requiring financial advisers to act in their clients' best interest. And the Department of Education has withdrawn Obama-era regulations meant to strengthen protections for student borrowers. The new approach -- welcomed by banks and business leaders -- has alarmed consumer advocates who fear it gives an advantage to Wall Street and other powerful industries while leaving ordinary Americans more susceptible to fraud, discrimination and predatory lending."

These schemes are part of a big con job being enabled with help from many anti-conservation conservatives in Congress, for their own benefit and that of corporate beneficiaries. One of the sneakiest methods that Trump Republicans used to impose their scams on the country is the Congressional Review Act. This law empowers Congress to make expedited reviews of federal regulations and overrule them. Republicans in Congress under Trump used this law to nullify more than a dozen rules enacted by the Obama administration. Prior to 2017, this Act had only been used once in 20 years. "If Trump and Republicans had not reversed these rules, then companies applying for federal contracts would have had to disclose their labor violations; coal mines would have had to reduce the huge amounts of debris dumped into streams; telecommunications companies would have had to take 'reasonable measures' to protect their customers' personal information; individuals receiving Social Security payments for disabling mental illnesses would have been added to a list of those not allowed to buy guns; states would have been limited in the drug-testing they could perform on those receiving unemployment insurance benefits; certain hunting practices would not have been allowed on national wildlife refuges in Alaska; and states could have set up retirement savings plans for those who don't have the option at work."

The precedent has been set, and the need is great for Joe Biden to reverse many of Trump's wrongful executive orders. Only by coming together to reject the manipulative dividers and exploiters, and their dastardly self-serving

agenda, will we be able to adequately address the challenges of environmental despoliation, reckless fiscal irresponsibility and rash efforts to undermine the general welfare. We can no longer afford to neglect extremes of inequality, desperate insecurity and gender discrimination, and we must deal farsightedly with big issues like shortages of fresh water, homelessness, inflation, gun violence and conditions that contribute to opioid addiction and overdoses.

May urgency and passion unite with peaceful revolutionary fervor to drive dramatic positive change for all Americans, and all peoples in other countries, and all life on Earth. To achieve greater prospects of peaceable coexistence, we should allow ourselves to be guided by reason, justice and moral Right Understanding.

Meanwhile, partially masked by an obfuscating avalanche of tweets, fake news, hype, lies, scandals, malfeasance and incessant efforts to distract and misdirect attention from critical issues, Trump engaged in Wag-the-Dog-like scenarios. "For Trump, each bold stroke is like a spritz of Febreze on his narrative of domestic scandal, momentarily masking" investigations into his treacherous ploys with Russia and other aspects of his illegitimate electoral victory, including his efforts to conceal information about his involvement with porn star Stormy Daniels and other women. Philip Rucker, White House Bureau Chief at the Washington Post, observed: "By making brash and risky moves on the world stage -- from shredding the Iran nuclear deal to negotiating nuclear disarmament with the North Koreans to imposing tariffs on Chinese imports -- Trump has a chance to change the way voters evaluate his presidency." He tried to fool the majority, and should never again be eligible.

"My whole life I've been greedy, greedy, greedy," said Trump in 2016. "I've grabbed all the money I could get. I'm so greedy. But now I want to be greedy for the United States." It turns out that being greedy is one of the few things Trump has been honest about -- but always for himself. In a New York Magazine article *It's the Corruption, Stupid*, which featured Trump's face on the cover with a grotesque pig's nose, Jonathan Chait wrote: "Since Trump took office, his pledge to ignore his own interests has been almost forgotten, lost in a disorienting hurricane of endless news. It is not just a morbid joke but a legitimate problem for the opposition that all the bad news about Trump keeps getting obscured by other bad news about Trump."

Jonathan Chait also made it clear that self-dealing and corruption, rather than Russia, may be the "Greatest Political Liability" for Trump. Chait's cover story in New York Magazine was accompanied by a separate piece, *501 Days in Swampland*, which was promoted online with the headline "501 Days of Trump & Co. Stealing America Blind." Obviously, Trump needed "a fixer" like Michael Cohen more than ever, but unfortunately for him, Cohen was convicted on numerous felonies for the fixing he did for Trump (and other crimes).

Trump made a lofty promise in his inaugural address. "The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer," he vowed. "For too long, a small group in our nation's capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished -- but the people did not share in its wealth." But then Trump has delivered another message, without saying it out loud, which was aimed at a much smaller, but very wealthy, audience. "The very first place Trump headed after being sworn in -- his true destination all along, in a sense -- was the Old Post Office and Clock Tower, which only 12 days before the election had been repurposed as the Trump International Hotel Washington. The elegant granite structure, whose architectural character Trump had promised to preserve, was now besmirched by a gaudy, faux-gold sign bearing his name. The carefully choreographed stop sent a clear signal to the foreign governments, lobbyists and corporate interests keen on currying favor in Washington: The rewards of government would now be reaped by a single man -- and the people would bear the cost." Forced to reveal financial information, Trump's May 2018 financial disclosure showed a \$5 million profit on \$40 million in revenues on this property. It also showed that dozens of political and business groups and 7 foreign governments have paid for events or visits there.

"More than at any time in history, the president of the U.S. is actively using the power and prestige of his office to line his own pockets: landing loans for his businesses, steering wealthy buyers to his condos, securing cheap foreign labor for his resorts, preserving federal subsidies for his housing projects, easing regulations on his golf courses, licensing his name to overseas projects, even peddling coffee mugs and shot glasses bearing the presidential seal. For Trump, whose business revolves around the marketability of his name, there has proved to be no public policy too big, and no private opportunity too crass, to exploit for personal profit."

More Aspects of Corruption Incarnate

It should come as no surprise that instead of ethics reform, Trump filled his administration with something like 200 persons who were former lobbyists for industries that they then acted as insiders to give maximized benefits to, almost always to the detriment of the people. This led to many scandals as Trump first chose industry shills like EPA head Scott Pruitt and treacherous public lands exploiter Ryan Zinke, and many of them indulged in extravagant expenditures of the public's money.

"This extravagant spending around public displays of status -- call it, with apologies to Thorstein Veblen, conspicuous corruption -- has become a trademark of the Trump administration", wrote David Graham in his article *A Cabinet of Conspicuous Corruption*. "Wasteful spending of taxpayer dollars by several Secretaries follows a tone set by the president." The Trump brand is not just tarnished, it is corroded and tipping into criminality. "There are so many cases of huge spending of taxpayer dollars by Cabinet secretaries that it's easy to lose track of them all -- or simply to become desensitized -- so here's a few of the lowlights." Graham goes on to mention the ugly details of misconduct and corrupt practices by Trump's billionaire Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, his first HHS Secretary Tom Price, EPA head Scott Pruitt, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke and Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin.

"The impulse to live luxuriously on taxpayer dollars has become a pattern for this administration. It is not the only form of impropriety on display. The president has surrounded himself with crooks and liars throughout his political career, and there are more traditional forms of corruption at play in the administration. There was Carl Icahn apparently using a post as a senior adviser to further his own personal interests. There's Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross claiming he would divest holdings but not actually doing so (which of course echoes the non-divestment of the president himself). There are warnings that Ben Carson could be using his position to advance his son's business interests." And let's not forget billionaire Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, who favored funding of private schools over public schools, and appeared to care a lot more about the student loan industry than students being saddled with excessive indebtedness.

Trump and Energy Secretary Rick Perry planned to stick utility customers and taxpayers with the bill for bailing out failing coal and nuclear plants, and they tried to justify the move as a matter of national security. In reality, this action would simply have shifted financial burdens away from polluters and onto families and businesses, which would be forced to shell out billions of dollars to keep these withering industries alive despite the fact that cheaper, cleaner and renewable sources of energy are available. And there are many other facets of swamp creature corruption, including influence peddling, pay-to-play politics, illicit Deutsche Bank financing, protection racket schemes of extortion and other highly suspicious activities.

"But why has extravagant spending around public displays of status become a distinctive form of corruption for this particular administration? It's probably impossible to answer that question definitively, but a few informed guesses make the excessive spending seem like a paradigmatic Trump administration scandal. One is that the president sets the tone for the rest of the administration. The George W. Bush administration began with a heavy focus on MBA-style management, reflecting its MBA-holding president. Obama's administration valorized Ivy League intellectualism. It stands to reason that, in a presidency helmed by a man whose name is synonymous with decadent displays of luxury, and who is famous for flying around the country in a private jet with his name on the side, Cabinet members would seek to emulate the same luxurious jet-setting lifestyle, with their own first-class travel, stays in luxurious hotels, and imposing security details." And doing so 'on the taxpayer's dime.'

An Aside on Hardened Hearts

The pressure of outraged reaction at the inhumane treatment of migrant children grew so great in June 2018 that Trump was forced to reverse course and sign an executive order to end his policy of forcibly separating illegal immigrant children and parents at the border with Mexico. This 'zero tolerance' policy had been put in place a couple months earlier by Jeff Sessions and Stephen Miller, along with Trump and others in his group.

First Lady Melania Trump visited immigrant detention sites in Texas in June 2018, but the photo op was jarringly overshadowed by her wearing an in-your-face jacket on route that read in big capital letters on the back, "I REALLY DON'T CARE, DO U". That was an in-your-face attitude for the wife of the man responsible for inhumane "zero

tolerance" family separation policies and stealthy efforts to shred the social safety net. Then on a second trip soon thereafter, the First Lady visited Arizona and expressed sympathy to border control agents who were doing the hard job of enforcing her rogue husband's child terrorizing, virulently unempathetic, harm-engendering, counterproductive and immoral immigration policies. Their jobs were made harder by the bad optics of Stephen Miller's patently racist hostility even to desperate asylum seekers.

Trump was forced to end his administration's family separation policy because the optics revealed such outrages against decency and moral values, as well as his fascist-like and un-American ruthless lack of caring. Powerful pressure came from religious leaders and all five living First Ladies, as well as politicians in both parties. Even Laura Bush was moved to express how horrifying she found this coldly calculating strategy. "Period." At a meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic bishops, Cardinal Joseph Tobin publicly urged that a delegation be dispatched as a "sign of our pastoral concern and protest against the hardening of the American heart."

Trump's executive order still mandated the jailing of migrant families seeking safety in the U.S., and it did not save or release any children from detention. "At best, it will ensure that children will be locked in family detention centers -- essentially internment camps -- with their parents, possibly indefinitely." Trump hoped this remedial order would distract the public and kill momentum for stopping his administration's cruel and harm-engendering detention policies toward immigrants and asylum seekers, and their exile in Mexico.

In the story in Exodus, God says He will harden Pharaoh's heart, and then He will multiply His miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt. But the Pharaoh would not listen. Then God rendered "mighty acts of judgment" against the Egyptian people, condemning them to the worst series of plagues in history, on account of the hard-hearted Pharaoh, even though that emperor was oppressing the Egyptians as well as the Israelites. The injustices in this patriarchal tale run very deep.

Stephen Miller was the chief architect of the unchristian racist separation policy. A story of Miller's bigoted past, as reported about his high school days at Santa Monica High School, should have been sufficient grounds to disqualify him from his job as a White House senior policy advisor in the first place. It is a national disgrace that Miller was the type of person the Trump family wanted to have in charge of national policy on such a serious and challenging issue as immigration.

Think about this understanding in an opinion piece by the New York Times Editorial Board titled *The G.O.P. Built Donald Trump's Cages*: "We should rightly help address the root causes that are motivating migrant families to stream to the U.S. border." In 2016, "more individuals sought affirmative asylum from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in the last three years than in the prior 15 years combined." This is due to rampant violence in that region, and people being desperate to escape. "Helping these nations stabilize themselves is key to reducing the flow of asylum seekers. But Mr. Trump does not like complexity or long-term strategizing. He prefers casting blame and making threats. He has repeatedly vowed to cut off aid to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras unless they stem the flow of drugs and people into the United States." The act of "dehumanizing undocumented immigrants may be one of Mr. Trump's signature outrages, but it is hardly his only one. There is also his politicization of law enforcement, his attempts to undermine public faith in the democratic process, his attacks on the press, his family's suspect business dealings and his habitual lying."

The self-proclaimed "very stable genius" Trumpster cut spending on foreign aid, even though "removing a financial lifeline from nations already in chaos is hardly a recipe for progress." Trump sought personal triumph and self-enrichment through emotion manipulation, deceit and his dastardly scapegoating of immigrants and refugees and asylum seekers. He made wide-ranging efforts to discriminate against millions of people in racial minorities, indigent folks, pregnant women and poor children. But surely it would be a much better world if our representatives acted with less partisan rancor, skullduggery and selfish advantage seeking.

The top tactics demagogues use include exploiting emotions and blaming others and whipping up a frenzy of culture war outrage, grievance and angst. The family separation policy imposed by the Trump administration was one step too far, and the overreach illuminates the entire sordid agenda associated with strongman abuses of power and con man scams. Trump exerted control by taking ruthless advantage of people's prejudices and resentments through bombastic rhetoric, which he used to scapegoat migrants and refugees. He dehumanized these people by calling them "animals",

and strived to harden people's hearts against them. In general, he used a similar strategy against Latinos, Blacks and people in other racial minorities to undermine their rights and prerogatives, and he worked against the true well-being of women, gay men, lesbian women and poor people.

Instead of allowing schemers to divide us, all stakeholders should come together to seek a consensus on sensibly comprehensive immigration reforms that address all the complexities of the challenge. People fleeing violence and poverty in Central America and elsewhere should be treated with humanity and compassion, rather than being subjected to family separation, military troops and criminalization.

Interestingly, in biblical passages in Exodus, pharaohic abusers of power chose to harden their hearts, presumably so that they would feel less compunction about ruling harshly and acting in ruthless and heedless ways, and in ways inhumane and severely lacking in empathy and compassion.

Cruel treatment of asylum seekers is pathological, and it is sad that Donald Trump was so coldly calculating as to regard young Dreamers and refugee children as bargaining chips that gave him leverage in negotiations for billions of dollars in federal spending to be spent on an offensive wall that he began building between the U.S. and Mexico -- at the expense of American taxpayers.

Michael Brune of the Sierra Club observed just before the 2018 midterm elections: "Horribly, incredibly, the Trump administration has imprisoned thousands of innocent children at the border, but it doesn't stop there. There are the innocent children of Puerto Rico. There are the innocent children of Flint, Michigan. There are the innocent children who are growing up with polluted air and unsafe drinking water across the country. Children whose future Donald Trump has tossed aside because it has no value to him." ... "Our nation's immigration policies have been broken for decades. But instead of working on solutions that would treat human beings with respect, this administration has chosen a policy of intimidation and brutality. And though some of Trump's congressional enablers profess they don't have the stomach for what's happening to these children, their spinelessness makes them just as culpable." ... "We can hope that near-universal public outrage will be enough to finally shame them into decency. At this point, though, hope is not enough. We must act. We must do everything we can this November to reject their vision of an America where the land of hope and dreams is transformed into a citadel for the privileged."

Republican strategist Steve Schmidt renounced his membership in the Republican Party in June 2018 in disgust over the harshness of Republican politicians on this issue, declaring that leaders who are complicit with establishing internment camps for young people "will carry this shame through history. These legacies will be ones of well-earned ignominy. They have disgraced their country and brought dishonor to the Party of Lincoln."

An observation apocryphally attributed to Sinclair Lewis declares, "When fascism comes to America it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross." A form of modern American fascism is indeed unfolding in the USA today, and it is happening in the form of a demagogic Trumpian cult that harshly cracked down on migrants and refugees, subjecting them to indefinite detention, and cruelly separated children from their parents (until the optics of that outrage became too objectionable). This new form of right-wing hegemony over the people gains power by energizing a political base against not only immigrants but also honest journalists, a free press, and what Trump rails against as "fake news" that is critical of his policies, methods and scandalous behaviors.

Conclusion

Here's what's happening right now. Common good goals are being broadly undermined. This is being done to serve the top priority of our political representatives to further concentrate wealth and power in the hands of the few. We are sacrificing the primary postulates of sane governance by acquiescing to the desires of rich people, corrupt politicians, Big Money donors and giant corporations squeezing out excessive profits. Republican leaders have given debt-financed tax cuts to corporations and rich people, and allow corporate entities to externalize more costs onto society. These gambits adversely affect countless numbers of people, prominently including the vast majority of working people in the Trump base, which has been duped by his misdirection, lies and misrepresentations. Until the pandemic began, "In connection with these schemes and priorities, spending is being slashed on public health, fairness of opportunity initiatives, public education, research and development, scientific understandings, the criminal justice system, public broadcasting, family planning, protections of the environment, foreign aid, clean air and clean water, protected public lands, green energy and climate justice."

We must come together and diminish the influence of wealthy people like those in the Koch network, and by corrupt politicians bought by special interests involved in the profit-prepossessed military-industrial-banking-corporate-congressional complex. We should limit Big Money in politics with effective campaign finance legislation and a Constitutional Amendment, as proposed by the organization Move to Amend. This Amendment would sensibly take personhood rights away from corporations "to firmly establish that money is not speech, and that human beings, not corporations, are persons entitled to constitutional rights."

Drain the Swamp! Let's demand that a Tax Remedy law be passed that will effectively eliminate every penny gained by all persons in the top 1% of taxpayers in connection with the debt-financed tax cuts that Republicans in Congress enacted in December 2017. Better yet, we should institute a progressively graduated Excess Profits Tax, so as to interrupt the expediency of foisting gargantuan debt burdens on every taxpayer in every future year to finance so many swindles and the recovery efforts from the pandemic.

Truly,
Dr. Tiffany B. Twain