



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

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This essay is dedicated to a clear understanding of the core values of a true democracy and the many threats against them. The fundamental values of democracy include an overarching commitment to common good goals, liberty, fairness in justice, equality, truth, honesty, diversity, fair dealings toward everyone in their individual pursuits of happiness, popular sovereignty that assures power to the people, fiscal responsibility and patriotic devotion to these core values of democracy. In the United States of America, these values are commendably set forth in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and other significant documents, speeches and writings of the nation.

The enemies of democratic values include authority-abusing leaders, freedom-depriving opportunists, those who assault truth and undermine the freedom of the press, those who champion primary privileges for white males at the expense of females and people of color, those who support excessive power for the rich against the common good interests of people in the middle class and the poor, those who champion corporate power over the rights of individuals, ideological extreme conservatives in the judiciary, demagogic leaders who take ruthless advantage of people's emotions to gain narrow personal benefits and power, influence peddlers and others who engage in pay-to-play politics and self dealing and other forms of political corruption, and all who indulge in despotism and subvert the core values of democracy. One specific category of enemies of core democratic values are authoritarians abroad who interfere in our domestic affairs, especially including Vladimir Putin in Russia who collaborated with the goals of the Trump campaign to give power to reactionary conservatives.

Let's start here, with Putin and Russia. The initial title of this essay was *The Odd Conspiracy Between Scheming Republican Politicians and Russian Subversion by Vladimir Putin*, so the focus of these ideas is on the influence of Russia on our elections.

The U.S. all but bankrupted the Soviet Union during the internecine competition of the Cold War between 1945 and 1990. Now Russia seems to be exacting a measure of revenge by meddling in our elections and thereby undermining our democratic institutions, perverting our national decision-making, helping enable rich people to get away with many swindles, intimidating opponents and even assassinating persons who courageously get in their way, and sowing discord to deprive the American people of greater unity, tolerance, egalitarian fairness, security and personal liberties.

Russian trolls and bots are right now churning up antagonistic divisions between Americans. This was proven in the immediate aftermath of the assault rifle massacre by a teenager at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on February 14th, when a surge of inflammatory social media activity bombarded millions of Americans. Quite a Valentine's Day present, Vladimir! We should remember Abraham Lincoln's warning that a house divided against itself cannot stand.

Vladimir Putin knows even better than Trump Republicans that success in driving wedges between people is a key to imposing authoritarian control over a people, for he has been very successful against his own people. Enabled by this shrewdly manipulative understanding, Russian operatives are weaponizing social media platforms to exploit polarizing wedge issues. And the evil influence of Putin in the 2016 elections in the U.S. helped hand domineering control of our government to uncompromising deceitful reactionary demagogic "leaders", who are now busy promoting oligarchy and bankrupting the country with debt-financed tax breaks for the rich that are coupled with

draconian cuts to social safety net programs. And they are working tirelessly to impose budget cuts on almost every savvy aspect of civilized society, including improved public education, more affordable health care, smart green energy initiatives, robust protections of public lands and the environment, public service-oriented public broadcasting, the National Endowment of the Arts and the like. Thanks, greedy rich folks!

"Conservatives" in the U.S. are also working hard to harshly impose austerity measures on the masses, and to bolster imperialistic militarism, corporatocratic power and authoritarian police forces, and to sacrifice the global ecological commons and liquidate Earth's assets at the fastest possible rate to goose profits. And they are rigging the deregulated laissez-faire capitalist economy ever 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%.

Please, Vladimir, relent! Dante would have consigned you to spend your afterlife in many of the nine circles of Hell for your greed, abuses of power, deceit and treachery. Look what you have given us. As Professor Robert Reich recently wrote, "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."

Robert Reich continues: "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?"

"Winning and getting even."

"But as a year with Mr. Trump as president has shown, this is no 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."

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 *US in an Oligarchy Not a Democracy*. The study's opening question was, "Who governs? Who really rules?" in this country. The study found that the U.S. is no longer a true democracy, but instead a profoundly corrupt oligarchy.

Zuesse provocatively observes: "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."

Vladimir Putin began his career as a spy, having been a KGB foreign intelligence officer for 16 years before entering politics. But there is something more consistently diabolical than mere espionage and counterterrorism intelligence, and that is making sustained efforts to achieve subversion of foreign governments by influencing their domestic politics, pressuring politicians, interfering in their elections, sowing discord and supporting reactionary opposition parties and schemes devised to divide the people.

History tells us that Russia and the West have been practicing subversion for a century, and Russians are said to still be angry over the incident of "the Lockhart Plot", in which Latvian soldiers were paid by the British to launch a counter-coup against the Bolshevik government in 1917. Bolshevik revolutionaries had capitalized on the successful February Revolution against Tsarist autocracy, which took place early in 1917, by staging their own armed insurrection in Petrograd, led by Vladimir Lenin. After this October Revolution, British operatives allegedly attempted to assassinate Lenin in a plot sanctioned by the British government, though this is still officially denied. The Bolshevik government reaction to this plot was to strengthen its secret police to protect against outside interference and to send its spies abroad to discern the plans and potentially evil intentions of others. We are paying a steep price for this totalitarian reaction in the USA today.

Vladimir Lenin blamed the First World War on capitalism, contending rather convincingly that it was the workers

who suffered the most in wars, while rich industrialists, weapons manufacturers and other collaborating capitalists made money at the expense of the people and profited opportunistically from the severe perils suffered by the working class. The First World War had caused terrible hardships in Russia, so Lenin sued for peace and pulled Russia out of the war. As a result of this 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 the armed forces on the Western Front, so they sought to get Russia back into the war through the intrigue of the Lockhart Plot.

Fast forward 99 years, and the Republican reaction to Russian subversion in 2016 was actually to encourage it. Donald Trump Junior declared, "I love it." Republicans did this to gain power and thereby push their unjust, anti-egalitarian, debt indulging, anti-democratic and anti-environmental agenda. This subversive interference was thus a treacherous conspiracy against the United States. Let's get to the bottom of this intrigue! These same Republican con artists are currently trying to discredit the revelatory Mueller investigation into these scandalous schemes, claiming Trump is above the law and too busy trying to get Kim Jong Un to give up his North Korean nukes and scheming to overthrow the regime in Iran. Besides, he has lots of reservations to make hay on the golf course, so he can't be bothered with the inconvenience of the truth about his treachery or his numerous instances of financial malfeasance.

While the British failed in their plot to assassinate Vladimir Lenin, Vladimir Putin is getting Russian revenge by succeeding in imposing a ruthless Republican regime on the people of the U.S. with a puppet leader who has "conservatives" in Congress cowed. *We the People* must stand up and reject this rule! Vote against Republican incumbents in the November 2018 elections!

Senator John McCain urged his colleagues to reject the torture facilitator Gina Haspel's nomination to lead the CIA, uttering 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."

Far worse than the Russians, some say, is the nefarious influence of the "Kochtopus", the evocative name given to the billionaires Charles and David Koch 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."

The Koch organization has announced that it is committed to spending up to \$400 million to influence the 2018 election outcomes, partially as a thank you for the Republican Party's huge tax cuts for them, and "to change the trajectory of this country." Bernie Sanders provides 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." Sanders also confirms that the U.S. is becoming an oligarchy, partly due to the Supreme Court's narrow and extremely partisan *Citizens United* ruling, and "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."

By abusing the power of their unwarranted and corrupting influence, these two billionaires will gain more than one billion dollars a year in tax breaks from the Republican tax cut bill, financed by borrowing money from everyone in the future. So they could easily pay the \$400 million on the 2018 election out of their own pockets and still come 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 stability of the global climate, and the health of wildlife and the environment. Some of their specific goals, for instance, are to privatize the Department of Veterans Affairs, Social Security, Medicare and public education. In fact, they want to repeal virtually every piece of major legislation designed to protect the elderly, children, the sick, poor people and the environment that has been enacted since the 1930s.

The early muckraking writer Frank Norris ends the first evocative chapter of *The Octopus* with the sudden appearance of an unattached locomotive bursting onto the scene, startling the protagonist out of a reverie. It was a "terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon." But then he 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 moments before barreled through a herd of sheep, 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 Kochtopus is surely less dramatic, but far more harmfully impactful on the lives of tens of millions of Americans. The vast wealth and political influence of billionaires Charles and David Koch are a driving force behind an influence network of system-corrupting rich people that has worked assiduously to get politicians to cut their taxes, rigidly control working people, eliminate regulations designed to protect the environment, corrupt our democratic processes, distort our national priorities and severely undermine our democratic decision making.

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, and 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 new book *The Soul of American: The Battle for Our Better Angels*.

The Dastardly Duo of Donald Trump and Mike Pence

Conservative political commentator *George Will* wrote a scathing article in May 2018 about Trump and VP Mike Pence titled *Trump is no longer the worst person in government*. Listen to this excerpt of his sagacious perspective:

"Donald Trump, with his feral cunning, knew. The oleaginous Mike Pence, with his talent for toadyism and appetite for obsequiousness, could, Trump knew, become America's most repulsive public figure. And Pence, who has reached this pinnacle by dethroning his benefactor, is augmenting the public stock of useful knowledge. Because his is the authentic voice of today's lickspittle Republican Party, he clarifies this year's elections: Vote Republican to ratify groveling as governing." ...

"There will be negligible legislating by the next Congress, so ballots cast this November will be most important as validations or repudiations of the harmonizing voices of Trump, Pence, Arpaio and the like. Trump is what he is, a floundering, inarticulate jumble of gnawing insecurities and not-at-all compensating vanities, which is pathetic. Pence is what he has chosen to be, which is horrifying."

The rest of this essay examines the likely legacy that treacherous subversion of our politics by Russia is leaving for the American people.

The Shrewd Exploitation of Political Dishonesty

"If you don't read the newspaper you are uninformed; if you do, you are misinformed."

--- Mark Twain

Fake news is false information that has three main characteristics: It is factually inaccurate, and it is often framed in demagogic ways that are emotionally manipulative, and it is optimized to be propagated by being shared on Facebook or other social media sites. Trump tweets about FAKE NEWS all the time, but what he means is different. He has 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 his manipulative behaviors.

Many Trump Republicans won their 2016 election contests partially by propagating fake news and deceitful narratives and conspiracy theories that were forwarded on Facebook and other social media sites to millions of people. Trump now ironically charges that news stories are fake if 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 that Trump tells are unbelievable. The Washington Post has tracked more than 3,000 of them since he seized power. One of the most preposterous lies Trump tells is in regard to the incredibly impressive and brilliant team of Robert Mueller and his fellow Special Counsel investigators: "TOTAL WITCH HUNT". Right, right, right - - Trump is as innocent as driven snow. And say, what a sensational turn-around this would be, if true, from the

decidedly sordid details of his entire career.

Special Counsel Robert Mueller has assembled a formidable all-star team of expert investigators and lawyers to get to the bottom of Russian meddling in our 2016 elections. These lawyers, combined, possess a vast array of experience investigating financial fraud, corruption, money laundering, foreign bribery and organized crime, and they have already secured 22 indictments or guilty pleas. This makes it clear that insistent Republican assertions that the investigation is a "Witch Hunt" are patently preposterous.

The whole "witch hunt" assertions are part of Republican attempts to protect Trump and his minions from being found guilty of malfeasance. As Lesley Stahl, the "60 Minutes" correspondent, has said, Trump admitted to her that he attacks the press as part of a strategy to discredit reporters and news organizations to shield him 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.

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."

Again I think, let's flatter the Trumpster by giving him a Special Oscar as soon as possible for his Outstanding Performance in the role of deceitful narcissistic demagogue manipulating the populace and ruling with scandalous malfeasance, cunning swindles, blatant cronyism, bizarre nepotism, corrupt anti-egalitarianism and retrograde anti-environmentalism, all while accompanying his larger-than-life arrogance with a toxic avalanche of twittering madness and chaotic administration of the government, to which he is subjecting the American people .

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.

There is a long list of Trump scandals, but in the big picture they are all a part of a single mega-scandal, "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 is desperately trying to protect himself 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", all so that he is able to shield himself and his inner circle from legal consequences.

Trump, like run-of-the-mill authoritarians, thinks he can get away with deceit and distraction, and that he is above the rule of law, and that he cannot be held accountable to the people. He had tweeted before the election, "I will Make Our Government Honest Again -- believe me." That promise turns out to have been colossally dishonest! Subpoenas are surely coming, now that Trump is refusing to submit to an interview with the Mueller investigation team.

In an article titled *Trump is finding it easier to tear down old policies than to build his own*, these ideas are presented: "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. 'Asked during a recent interview for a Politico podcast what the Republican Party stands for now, Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.) responded: 'I don't know.'"

Note to Ben Sasse: Oh, come on! You mean that 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 Republican politicians is to gain and maintain power no matter what the consequences, so that's what they stand for, and it is damnable that they do this by pandering to rich people and cash-supercharged corporate entities, even though this often means that the vast majority of people will be harmed and the common good will be undermined and existentially disastrous Tragedy of the Commons impacts and outcomes will be facilitated.

We should make good use of words and ideas like this, because though they are designed to divide us, we can utilize their energy to transform feeling into action and to turbocharge a new cooperative focused energy that will enable us to better address the sea of troubles in which humanity finds itself.

Eric Trump Weighs In

Eric Trump arrogantly characterized Democrats as "not even people" in June 2017 because they supported the investigation into his father's election campaign and the suspicious enthusiasm of Republicans for having Russian operatives, Putin oligarchs and social media trolls and bots interfere in our elections to help Donald Trump gain victory and thereby sabotage our democracy. The unfolding story of how this was done is complemented with an improved understanding of how pushers of fake news, conspiracy theories and character assassinations succeeded in their treachery. Little Eric is outraged at allegations that Trump is abusing power and undermining American democracy and obstructing justice. "Not even people." ZING! That's worse than deplorable! Eric's way of seeing is far from clear-eyed. In the heat of battle, discord intensifies with deteriorating circumstances, and people say the craziest things!

Think about a fuller quote from Eric Trump: "I've never seen hatred like this, I mean to me they're not even people. It's so, so sad, I mean morality is just gone, morals have flown out the window we deserve so much better than this as a country." MORALS? LOL! In *See Clearly, Book Twelve of the Earth Manifesto*, the immorality of the many financial scams that rich people use to subject the masses are revealed and evaluated, and they make it clear that the real unethical and immoral actions are those engaged in by rich people, and by persons and entities that abuse the power of their influence for private advantage. And with regard to "hatred", I'll speak for millions of decent Americans in stating that the privilege-addled young Trump has got it all wrong. We progressives ARE people, and we are a majority who do not support Donald Trump's egregiously irresponsible leadership. And it is neither hatred nor sour grapes that motivates us to oppose the unprincipled Republican power grab. It is instead fairness-honoring democratic values and respect for greater honesty and a truer patriotism than his Trump Family First focus. It is not hatred, it is disgust at all the pathological scams and malfeasance that is being perpetrated on the American people, as provocatively set forth in *See Clearly*.

It is the federal budget where a "war on the poor" is in effect being waged, and the budget is one of the main pressure points where public lands and the environment are being sacrificed. The majority of Americans is angry at the arrogant attempt to repeal Obamacare and replace it with a "mean" new plan that would have given rich people \$800 billion in tax breaks at the expense of healthcare for millions of Americans. The majority supports improving public education, not slashing funding for it in order to subsidize privileged people and their kids in private schools. The majority favors expanded women's rights and empowerment, and they are against new limitations on contraception and safe abortion before fetal viability.

The majority supports environmentally sane planning and greater efforts to leave a more secure legacy to our children and grandchildren and every person forevermore in all future generations, rather than pandering to those who profit from the wasteful and polluting uses of fossil fuels and the abdication of responsibility for taking smart steps to ameliorate the effects of climate disruptions. No matter what various members of the Trump family tell us, we must soon adopt good plans that will ensure we make an intelligent transition to cleaner energy and a greater reliance on the use of renewable resources.

"Little Eric obviously didn't inherit enough of his father's genes and domineering stature," scoffed Roberto, the underground Mole, upon hearing these words, "so he is incapable of playing a convincing role as Central Casting's perfect insult-hurling demagogic deceiver. It must be admitted that his clueless narcissistic hubris is an effete echo of the diabolical Donald, and he sure is demonstrating a tendency to be excessively jejune in his efforts to manipulate public opinion."

Donald Trump has shown how little loyalty he feels to friends and allies who honor some principle higher than his self-interest. As Time Magazine Editor-in-Chief Nancy Gibbs wrote in August 2017, "Most successful leaders, certainly most Presidents, preach an American gospel about freedom, justice, imagination, ambition. They invoke values in the service of both achieving goals and healing wounds. But that is not this President's liturgy. Instead of summoning our better angels, he strums deep chords of grievance and resentment: The world is not a community, it's a business. If you're not winning, you're losing. And anyone who invests in a common good or a shared sacrifice

is a sucker."

I beg to differ. Let's redesign our great country to resoundingly refute these treacherously divisive attitudes!

"The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails."

--- William A. Ward

One Dastardly Result of Politicians Pandering to Giant Corporations

The Republican Party has become "dangerously extreme" in its denials of climate science. And the Party's ideological denial is both cowardly and highly risky. The prominent economist Paul Krugman expressed the ramifications in an article in December 2015: "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."

Trump's arrogant renunciation of the Paris Climate Agreement is a blatant refusal to responsibly work together with leaders in other nations on Earth to address one of the biggest existential challenges ever faced by human beings.

The Republican agenda is to gain power no matter what means is required and regardless of the negative consequences. The bottom line of their goal 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 middle class supporters and poor people, their zeal to cut the social security safety net in order to give debt-financed 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 health of the environmental underpinnings of our overall well-being.

Let's all exit our echo chambers, my fellow Americans, and congregate in the middle to seek compromises that improve our realization of greater good goals. Let's listen, and talk and debate respectfully.

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

--- Rumi

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 maniacal rallies that he would "drain the swamp" in Washington D.C. He claimed he had plans to make sweeping ethics reforms, and he declared that he would get rid of corrupt political insiders and eliminate government waste of public funds, and he actually pledged to "make our government honest once again."

Honest once again? Laugh out loud!!! These assertions were part of a colossal Big Lie, for all along and indeed throughout his career, he has been the antichrist of rectitude, a cheater and liar, and his egomaniacal greed for money and power and self-dealing made it clear that he would fill his Cabinet with schemers, Wall Street robber barons and other political insiders who have blatant and unmitigated conflicts of interest in personal enrichment and the advancement of their careers as politicians. It should come as no surprise that instead of ethics reform, Trump has filled his federal government bureaucracy with almost 200 persons who were former lobbyists for industries that they are now acting as insiders to give maximized benefits to, almost always to the detriment of the people. This has led to unprecedented scandal as he has filled his administration with scam artists like all-but-evil EPA head Scott Pruitt and treacherous public lands exploiter Ryan Zinke, and most of them are engaging in making extravagant expenditures with 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", writes 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 corrupt practices by Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin and HUD Head Ben Carson, and former HHS Secretary Tom Price, and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, and EPA head Scott Pruitt, and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin.

"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 Carson could be using his position to advance his son's business interests."

And of course there are other facets of swamp creature corruption, including influence peddling, pay-to-play politics, protection racket extortion schemes and other highly suspicious activities coming to light.

"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. The Obama administration valorized Ivy League intellectualism. It stands to reason that in an 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."

"The problem is that Trump's private jet was just that: private, and paid for by himself. What these Cabinet secretaries are attempting to do is to live a Trump-lite lifestyle on the taxpayer's dime. In so doing, they often break rules about spending, as in Carson and Shulkin's cases; even when they do not, it looks awful, since no one wants to see their hard-earned money put toward lavish travel by political appointees. (The costs of Trump's travel have also drawn deserved criticism, though the rules and expectations around presidents are different from Cabinet secretaries.)"

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 helping solve the biggest of our national and international challenges? Ah, yes, of course: such progress is being blocked by corrupt pandering politicians whose top priorities are to get financial support, advance their own careers, satisfy their own god-damned self-interest, and enhance their own fortunes.

The reason that solutions are not easy to implement is only because the hubris-filled domineering few refuse to compromise and insist on imposing their wills upon the masses, making out like bandits from excessive profiteering and cost externalizing gambits, and seeking excessively unfair political representation in their favor, and using deceit, demagoguery, fear mongering, divisive ploys and the exploitation of workers' insecurities and vulnerabilities to impose anti-egalitarian national priorities and staunch opposition to collective bargaining and anti-environmentalism, and anti-democratic efforts to torpedo progressive plans.

As American politics has become ever more unreasonably far right, it is serving to inspire stronger passions for honest and effective solutions to the big problems that affect us all. With governmental control in the USA having been seized by far right politicians kowtowing to Trump, our national policies have lurched backwards, making our country less fair, more discriminatory, more disdainful of public health and safety, and more favorable to profiteering by huge corporations, especially including fossil fuel exploiters, pharmaceutical companies, health insurance companies and gun manufacturers.

A much better prescription for our overall health and well-being would be for all voters to demand more honest representatives, less corruption, less wrongheaded leadership, and representatives who demonstrate an overarching concern for the true greater good. We need national policies that place higher values on conservation and sustainability and precautionary principles, and that are not so extremely depletionary in their opposition to

conservation and 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 that include climate science, environmental protections, gun safety, 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. As Neil deGrasse Tyson points out, "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 be repealed by cultivating fear, division and abuses of 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 has led a systematic rollback of consumer protections that could affect nearly every aspect of Americans' spending habits, according to Renae Merle and Tracy Jan. "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. 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 colossal con job that is being perpetrated with the collaboration of a whole host of anti-conservation conservatives in Congress, for their own benefit and their corrupt corporate beneficiaries in the oil, coal and natural gas industries.

One of the sneaky methods Republicans have used excessively to impose their scams on the country is the Congressional Review Act. This is a law that empowers Congress to make an expedited review of federal regulations and overrule them. The Republican Congress under Trump has used this law to nullify more than a dozen rules enacted by the Obama administration. Prior to 2017, the Congressional Review 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 amount 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." Etc.

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. Or our crumbling infrastructure, shortages of fresh water, homelessness, overpopulation, gun violence and the conditions that contribute to the opioid addiction and drug overdose crisis.

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 and moral Right Understanding.

Meanwhile, partially masked by an obfuscating avalanche of tweets, fake news, hype, lies, stranger-than-fiction scandals, epic malfeasance and other efforts to distract and misdirect attention from critical issues, Trump is engaging in a Wag-the Dog-like scenario. "For Trump, each bold stroke, is like a spritz of Febreze on his narrative of domestic scandal, momentarily masking" the expanding investigations into his treacherous ploys with Russia and

other aspects of his illegitimate victory, including his efforts to hide information about his involvement with porn star Stormy Daniels and other women. Philip Rucker, the White House Bureau Chief at the Washington Post continues, "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 figures he can fool the majority indefinitely. Let's prove him radically wrong at the ballot box!

"My whole life I've been greedy, greedy, greedy," declared Donald Trump during the 2016 campaign. "I've grabbed all the money I could get. I'm so greedy. But now I want to be greedy for the United States." Jonathan Chait observes that "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."

In an article in *New York Magazine* that features Trump's face with a grotesque pig's nose, titled *It's the Corruption, Stupid*, Jonathan Chait makes it clear that self-dealing and corruption, rather than Russia, may be Trump's "Greatest Political Liability". Chait's cover story in *New York Magazine* was accompanied by a separate piece, *501 Days in Swampland*, by Joy Crane and Nick Tabor, which was promoted online with the headline "501 Days of Trump & Co. Stealing America Blind."

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."

Trump has delivered another message, without speaking it out loud, which was aimed at a much smaller, but very rich, 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."

"More than at any time in history, the president of the United States 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."

It turns out that one of the few things Trump has been honest about was his campaign admission, "My whole life I've been greedy, greedy, greedy. I've grabbed all the money I could get." His self-described "fixer" Michael Cohen sold access to Trump and other administration officials for millions of dollars. Unethical opportunism like this will likely prove to be illegal if Cohen promised specific government actions in exchange for payments.

It is unconscionably irresponsible for Republican politicians to have run up the national debt by \$20 trillion over the span of time since 1980 with their irrationally regressive debt-financed Republican Tax Cut swindles. They rationalize this con job by trying to sell people on believing in their Trickle-Down economic theory. But this swindle is based on a Big Lie, and clearly, what has actually been trickling down is not propitious benefits and widespread prosperity, but spiking extreme inequities, poisonous divisions and hard-nosed austerity for the masses, in addition to the harmful effects of toxic wastes and environmental despoliation.

Refer again to the conservative political commentator *George Will's* scathing article in May 2018 about Mike Pence titled *Trump is no longer the worst person in government*. Listen to his sagacious perspective:

Last June, a Trump Cabinet meeting featured testimonials offered to Dear Leader by his forelock-tugging colleagues. His chief of staff, Reince Priebus, caught the spirit of the worship service by thanking Trump for the "blessing" of being allowed to serve him. The hosannas poured forth from around the table, unredeemed by even a scintilla of insincerity. Priebus was soon deprived of his blessing, as was Tom Price. Before Price's ecstasy of public service was truncated because of his incontinent enthusiasm for charter flights, he was the secretary of health and human services who at the Cabinet meeting said, "I can't thank you enough for the privileges you've given me." The vice president chimed in but saved his best riff for a December Cabinet meeting when, as The Post's Aaron Blake calculated, Pence praised Trump once every 12 seconds for three minutes: "I'm deeply humbled. ..." Judging by the number of times Pence announces himself "humbled," he might seem proud of his humility, but that is impossible because he is conspicuously devout and pride is a sin.

Between those two Cabinet meetings, Pence and his retinue flew to Indiana for the purpose of walking out of an Indianapolis Colts football game, thereby demonstrating that football players kneeling during the national anthem are intolerable to someone of Pence's refined sense of right and wrong. Which brings us to his Arizona salute last week to Joe Arpaio, who was sheriff of Maricopa County until in 2016 voters wearied of his act.

Noting that Arpaio was in his Tempe audience, Pence, oozing unctuousness from every pore, called Arpaio "another favorite," professed himself "honored" by Arpaio's presence, and praised him as "a tireless champion of ... the rule of law." Arpaio, a grandstanding, camera-chasing bully and darling of the thuggish right, is also a criminal, convicted of contempt of court for ignoring a federal judge's order to desist from certain illegal law enforcement practices. Pence's performance occurred eight miles from the home of Sen. John McCain, who could teach Pence — or perhaps not — something about honor.

Henry Adams said that "practical politics consists in ignoring facts," but what was the practicality in Pence's disregard of the facts about Arpaio? His pandering had no purpose beyond serving Pence's vocation, which is to ingratiate himself with his audience of the moment.

Hoosiers, of whom Pence is one, sometimes say that although Abraham Lincoln was born in Kentucky and flourished in Illinois, he spent his formative years -- December 1816 to March 1830 -- in Indiana, which he left at age 21. Be that as it may, on Jan. 27, 1838, Lincoln, then 28, delivered his first great speech to the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield. Less than three months earlier, Elijah Lovejoy, an abolitionist newspaper editor in Alton, Ill., 67 miles from Springfield, was murdered by a pro-slavery mob. Without mentioning Lovejoy — it would have been unnecessary — Lincoln lamented that throughout America, "so lately famed for love of law and order," there was a "mobocratic spirit" among "the vicious portion of [the] population." So, "let reverence for the laws... become the *political religion* of the nation." Pence, one of evangelical Christians' favorite pin-ups, genuflects at various altars, as the mobocratic spirit and the vicious portion require.

It is said that one cannot blame people who applaud Arpaio and support his rehabilitators (Trump, Pence, et al.), because, well, globalization or health-care costs or something. Actually, one must either blame them or condescend to them as lacking moral agency. Republicans silent about Pence have no such excuse.

Economics for a Sustainable World

Solidarity economics is an idea whose time has come. It started, perhaps, for an idea expressed at the World Social Forum that "another world is possible". Applying this concept to economics, the idea posits that it is very possible to organize economies around fairer principles that are markedly different from those characterizing global capitalism today. See the riff in my essay *The Common Good, Properly Understood*, titled *Capitalism Is Coming To An End, Says World Renowned Economist*

It concerns former Greek finance minister named Yanis Varoufakis and his claims that capitalism is going to make itself obsolete through the increased prevalence of artificial intelligence and mechanization. Varoufakis warned that Karl Marx "will have his revenge", saying technology is going to "destroy a lot more jobs than it creates. He says capitalism will undermine capitalism because technology companies will make corporations and the private means of production obsolete.

"The 56-year-old has said the current system is "unsustainable" as vast swathes of people become unemployed thanks to the advent of automation in many industries. To get around this, Mr. Varoufakis said governments

need to enact serious redistributive policies. One way they could do this, suggests the economist, is to put 10 per cent of all future issues of shares into a "common welfare fund" which would be owned by the people. From this fund would be a "universal basic dividend" could be paid to every citizen. This idea, remarkably, is consistent with recommendations made by the French economist Thomas Piketty in his best-selling book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*."

"This type of visionary plan is needed because of the fact that all the developed nations on Earth, astonishingly, will experience job loss rates of up to 47% within the next 20 years due to mechanization, artificial intelligence, the use of robots, and other labor-eliminating technologies, according to an assessment made in 2013 by Carl Frey and Michael Osborne of Oxford University." ... These understandings mean that we face colossal challenges, so it is titanically foolish for our leaders to be emulating the Roman emperor Nero, who fiddled while Rome burned. We must demand better!