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Trump's Threat To Democracy

TWO POLITICAL SCIENTISTS specializing in how democracies decay and die have compiled four warning signs to determine if a political leader is a dangerous authoritarian:

1. The leader shows only a weak commitment to democratic rules. 2. He or she denies the legitimacy of opponents. 3. He or she tolerates violence. 4. He or she shows some willingness to curb civil liberties or the media.

"A politician who meets even one of these criteria is cause for concern," Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, both professors at Harvard, write in their important new book, "How Democracies Die," which will be released next week.

"With the exception of Richard Nixon, no major-party presidential candidate met even one of these four criteria over the last century," they say, which sounds reassuring. Unfortunately, they have one update: "Donald Trump met them all."

We tend to assume that the threat to democracies comes from coups or violent revolutions, but the authors say that in modern times, democracies are more likely to wither at the hands of insiders who gain power initially through elections. That's what happened, to one degree or another, in Russia, the Philippines, Turkey, Venezuela, Ecuador, Hungary, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, Poland and Peru.

Venezuela was a relatively prosperous democracy, for example, when the populist demagogue Hugo Chávez tapped the frustrations of ordinary citizens to be elected president in 1998.

A survey that year found that the Venezuelan public overwhelmingly believed that "democracy is always the best form of government," with only one-quarter saying that authoritarianism is sometimes

The president shows all four warning signs of a dangerous authoritarian.

preferable. Yet against their will, Venezuelans slid into autocracy.

"This is how democracies now die," Levitsky and Ziblatt write. "Democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box."

Likewise, the authors say, no more than 2 percent of Germans or Italians joined the Nazi or Fascist Parties before they gained power, and early on there doesn't seem to have been clear majority support for authoritarianism in either Germany or Italy. But both Hitler and Mussolini were shrewd demagogues who benefited from the blindness of political insiders who accommodated them.

Let me say right here that I don't for a moment think the United States will follow the path of Venezuela, Germany or Italy. Yes, I do see in Trump these authoritarian tendencies — plus a troubling fondness for other authoritarians, like Vladimir Putin in Russia and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines — but I'm confident our institutions are stronger than Trump.

It's true that he has tried to undermine institutions and referees of our political system: judges, the Justice Department, law enforcement agencies like the F.B.I., the intelligence community, the news media, the opposition party and Congress. But to his great frustration, American institutions have mostly passed the stress test with flying colors.

"President Trump followed the electoral authoritarian script during his first year," Levitsky and Ziblatt conclude. "He made efforts to capture the referees, sideline the key players who might halt him, and tilt the playing field. But the president has talked more than he has acted, and his most notorious threats have not been realized... Little actual backsliding occurred in 2017."

That seems right to me: The system worked.

And yet.

For all my confidence that our institutions will trump Trump, the chipping away at the integrity of our institutions and norms does worry me. Levitsky and Ziblatt warn of the unraveling of democratic norms — norms such as treating the other side as rivals rather than as enemies, condemning violence and bigotry, and so on. This unraveling was underway long before Trump (Newt Gingrich nudged it along in the 1990s), but Trump accelerated it.

It matters when Trump denounces the "deep state Justice Department," calls Hillary Clinton a "criminal" and urges "jail" for Huma Abedin, denounces journalists as the "enemy of the American people" and promises to pay the legal fees of supporters who "beat the crap" out of protesters. With such bombast, Trump is beating the crap out of American norms.

I asked the authors how we citizens can most effectively resist an authoritarian president. The answer, they said, is not for Trump opponents to demonize the other side or to adopt scorched-earth tactics, for this can result in "a death spiral in which rule-breaking becomes pandemic." It's also not terribly effective, as we've seen in Venezuela.

Rather, they suggested protesting vigorously — but above all, in defense of rights and institutions, not just against the ruler. They emphasized that it's critical to build coalitions, even if that means making painful compromises, so that protests are very broadly based.

"If these actions are limited to blue-state progressives, the risk of failure and/or deeper polarization is very high," Levitsky told me in an interview. "Extraordinary measures are sometimes necessary to defend democracy, but they should rest on extraordinary coalitions — coalitions that include business leaders, religious leaders and crucially, as many conservatives and Republicans as possible." □

Democracy's a very fragile thing. You have to take care of democracy. As soon as you stop being responsible to it and allow it to turn into scare tactics, it's no longer democracy, is it? It's something else. It may be an inch away from totalitarianism.

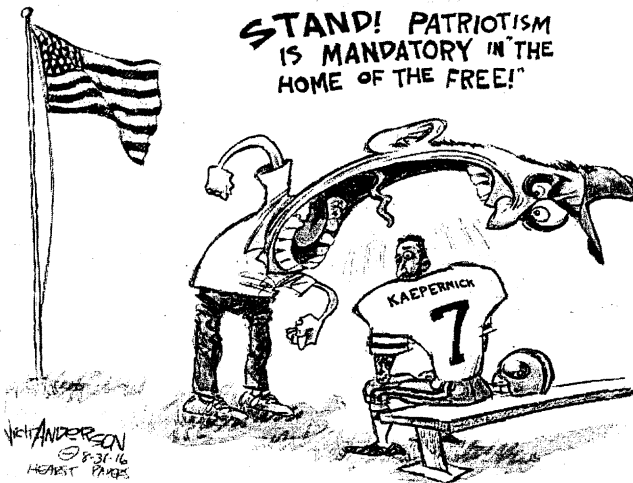
-Sam Shepard

Democracy is not a fragile flower; still it needs cultivating.

-Ronald Reagan

"The fabric of democracy is always fragile everywhere because it depends on the will of citizens to protect it, and when they become scared, when it becomes dangerous for them to defend it, it can go very quickly."

-Margaret Atwood,



On the back answer the following:

1. What is the main argument on the author?
2. Do you think Donald Trump is actually a threat to American democracy? Why or Why not?
3. Under what conditions do you think American democracy could/will fail?
 1. The author of the book reviewed here, Timothy Snyder (professor at Yale) wrote an article in the New York Times regarding the invasion of the Capitol on January 6th 2021. Read the selections & give your thoughts.

From Timothy Snyder - Yale Professor, author of *On Tyranny*, New York Times 1/9/21 (edited)
When Donald Trump stood before his followers on Jan. 6 and urged them to march on the United States Capitol, he was doing what he had always done. He never took electoral democracy seriously nor accepted the legitimacy of its American version.

Even when he won, in 2016, he insisted that the election was fraudulent — that millions of false votes were cast for his opponent. In 2020, in the knowledge that he was trailing Joseph R. Biden in the polls, he spent months claiming that the presidential election would be rigged and signaling that he would not accept the results if they did not favor him. He wrongly claimed on Election Day that he had won and then steadily hardened his rhetoric: With time, his victory became a historic landslide and the various conspiracies that denied it ever more sophisticated and implausible.

People believed him, which is not at all surprising. It takes a tremendous amount of work to educate citizens to resist the powerful pull of believing what they already believe, or what others around them believe, or what would make sense of their own previous choices. Plato noted a particular risk for tyrants: that they would be surrounded in the end by yes-men and enablers. Aristotle worried that, in a democracy, a wealthy and talented demagogue could all too easily master the minds of the populace. Aware of these risks and others, the framers of the Constitution instituted a system of checks and balances. The point was not simply to ensure that no one branch of government dominated the others but also to anchor in institutions different points of view.

In this sense, the responsibility for Trump's push to overturn an election must be shared by a very large number of Republican members of Congress. Rather than contradict Trump from the beginning, they allowed his electoral fiction to flourish. They had different reasons for doing so.

Come in Congress etc promoted this big lie and abdicated their responsibility.

Post-truth is pre-fascism, and Trump has been our post-truth president. When we give up on truth, we concede power to those with the wealth and charisma to create spectacle in its place. Without agreement about some basic facts, citizens cannot form the civil society that would allow them to defend themselves. If we lose the institutions that produce facts that are pertinent to us, then we tend to wallow in attractive abstractions and fictions. Truth defends itself particularly poorly when there is not very much of it around, and the era of Trump — like the era of Vladimir Putin in Russia — is one of the decline of local news. Social media is no substitute: It supercharges the mental habits by which we seek emotional stimulation and comfort, which means losing the distinction between what feels true and what actually is true.

Post-truth wears away the rule of law and invites a regime of myth. These last four years, scholars have discussed the legitimacy and value of invoking fascism in reference to Trumpian propaganda. One comfortable position has been to label any such effort as a direct comparison and then to treat such comparisons as taboo. More productively, the philosopher Jason Stanley has treated fascism as a phenomenon, as a series of patterns that can be observed not only in interwar Europe but beyond it.

My own view is that greater knowledge of the past, fascist or otherwise, allows us to notice and conceptualize elements of the present that we might otherwise disregard and to think more broadly about future possibilities. It was clear to me in October that Trump's behavior presaged a coup, and I said so in print; this is not because the present repeats the past, but because the past enlightens the present.

Like historical fascist leaders, Trump has presented himself as the single source of truth. His use of the term "fake news" echoed the Nazi smear *Lügenpresse* ("lying press"); like the Nazis, he referred to reporters as "enemies of the people." Like Adolf Hitler, he came to power at a moment when the conventional press had taken a beating; the financial crisis of 2008 did to American newspapers what the Great Depression did to German ones. The Nazis thought that they could use radio to replace the old pluralism of the newspaper; Trump tried to do the same with Twitter.

Thanks to technological capacity and personal talent, Donald Trump lied at a pace perhaps unmatched by any other leader in history. For the most part these were small lies, and their main effect was cumulative. To believe in all of them was to accept the authority of a single man, because to believe in all of them was to disbelieve everything else. Once such personal authority was established, the president could treat everyone else as the liars; he even had the power to turn someone from a trusted adviser into a dishonest scoundrel with a single tweet. Yet so long as he was unable to enforce some truly big lie, some fantasy that created an alternative reality where people could live and die, his pre-fascism fell short of the thing itself.

Some of his lies were, admittedly, medium-size: that he was a successful businessman; that Russia did not support him in 2016; that Barack Obama was born in Kenya. Such medium-size lies were the standard fare of aspiring authoritarians in the 21st century. In Poland the right-wing party built a martyrdom cult around assigning blame to political rivals for an airplane crash that killed the nation's president. Hungary's Viktor Orban blames a vanishingly small number of Muslim refugees for his country's problems. But such claims were not quite big lies; they stretched but did not rend what Hannah Arendt called "the fabric of factuality."

One historical big lie discussed by Arendt is Joseph Stalin's explanation of starvation in Soviet Ukraine in 1932-33. The state had collectivized agriculture, then applied a series of punitive measures to Ukraine that ensured millions would die. Yet the official line was that the starving were provocateurs, agents of Western powers who hated socialism so much they were killing themselves. A still grander fiction, in Arendt's account, is Hitlerian anti-Semitism: the claims that Jews ran the world, Jews were responsible for ideas that poisoned German minds, Jews stabbed Germany in the back during the First World War. Intriguingly, Arendt thought big lies work only in lonely minds; their coherence substitutes for experience and companionship.

In November 2020, reaching millions of lonely minds through social media, Trump told a lie that was dangerously ambitious: that he had won an election that in fact he had lost. This lie was big in every pertinent respect: not as big as "Jews run the world," but big enough. The significance of the matter at hand was great: the right to rule the most powerful country in the world and the efficacy and trustworthiness of its succession procedures. The level of mendacity was profound. The claim was not only wrong, but it was also made in bad faith, amid unreliable sources. It challenged not just evidence but logic: Just how could (and why would) an election have been rigged against a

Republican president but not against Republican senators and representatives? Trump had to speak, absurdly, of a “Rigged (for President) Election.”

On the surface, a conspiracy theory makes its victim look strong: It sees Trump as resisting the Democrats, the Republicans, the Deep State, the pedophiles, the Satanists. More profoundly, however, it inverts the position of the strong and the weak. Trump’s focus on alleged “irregularities” and “contested states” comes down to cities where Black people live and vote. At bottom, the fantasy of fraud is that of a crime committed by Black people against white people.

The claim that Trump was denied a win by fraud is a big lie not just because it mauls logic, misdescribes the present and demands belief in a conspiracy. It is a big lie, fundamentally, because it reverses the moral field of American politics and the basic structure of American history.

The lie outlasts the liar. The idea that Germany lost the First World War in 1918 because of a Jewish “stab in the back” was 15 years old when Hitler came to power. How will Trump’s myth of victimhood function in American life 15 years from now? And to whose benefit?

On Jan. 7, Trump called for a peaceful transition of power, implicitly conceding that his putsch had failed. Even then, though, he repeated and even amplified his electoral fiction: It was now a sacred cause for which people had sacrificed. Trump’s imagined stab in the back will live on chiefly thanks to its endorsement by members of Congress.

Trump is, for now, the martyr in chief, the high priest of the big lie. He is the leader of the breakers, at least in the minds of his supporters.

Trump’s coup attempt of 2020-21, like other failed coup attempts, is a warning for those who care about the rule of law and a lesson for those who do not. His pre-fascism revealed a possibility for American politics. For a coup to work in 2024, the breakers will require something that Trump never quite had: an angry minority, organized for nationwide violence, ready to add intimidation to an election. Four years of amplifying a big lie just might get them this. To claim that the other side stole an election is to promise to steal one yourself. It is also to claim that the other side deserves to be punished.

Informed observers inside and outside government agree that right-wing white supremacy is the greatest terrorist threat to the United States. Gun sales in 2020 hit an astonishing high. History shows that political violence follows when prominent leaders of major political parties openly embrace paranoia.

America will not survive the big lie just because a liar is separated from power. It will need a thoughtful repluralization of media and a commitment to facts as a public good. The racism structured into every aspect of the coup attempt is a call to heed our own history. Serious attention to the past helps us to see risks but also suggests future possibility. We cannot be a democratic republic if we tell lies about race, big or small. Democracy is not about minimizing the vote nor ignoring it, neither a matter of gaming nor of breaking a system, but of accepting the equality of others, heeding their voices and counting their votes.