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Ripe for Fascism: A Post-Coup d'Trump Autopsy of American Democracy



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

“If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading.”

– Lao Tzu

For the past few years, the corporate/establishment news media oft analyzed Donald Trump’s presidency in an historical vacuum, ignoring the decades-long, bipartisan embrace of neoliberalism that helped bring about his successful candidacy while focusing sensationally on his cult of reality TV personality. Such bread and circus tunnel vision misses the bigger picture. Trump, even with all his faults, is a symptom of a much larger pattern brought on by increased privatization of the public sphere, especially in the realms of education and media, which go back over half a century, particularly the past forty years. With the continued degradation of these key pillars of our society, our civic and information literacy has suffered greatly at a time when the world has become more complex, and our country more unequal.

As a consequence, we have become more partisan, more divided, and more estranged from one another as a society. We argued this in our book, *United States of Distraction*, and unfortunately our thesis continues to ring true.

Most legacy media outlets sought to persuade voters to choose Joe Biden for president because “[democracy is on the ballot](#)” and once Trump was out of office, things would return to [normal](#), we could all go back to “[brunch](#).” However, this analysis overlooks the crucial realities of how we got here and, as Lau Tzu might suggest, where we have been and are heading. The “return to normal” rhetoric distracts from the reality of American democracy: it is in such an emaciated state that a more adept and sophisticated version of Trump could easily come to power. It was our infatuation with what passes for “normal” that brought about this historical moment. [The Democracy Index](#) rates the U.S. as a “flawed democracy,” which means that the elections are free and fair, basic civil liberties are respected, but there are underlying issues (e.g. the erosion of the free press and suppression of opposition political parties and viewpoints). Prior to Trump, [scholars](#) noted that the U.S. was an [oligarchy](#), not a democratic republic. However, rudimentary corporate news media narratives concerning the so-called “coup” at the U.S. Capitol January 6th leave out crucial realities that can easily lead audiences to glean that Donald Trump and his followers single handedly undermined the American democratic experiment. To be clear, Trump as a person and as a symbol has been responsible for the proliferation of dangerous and disgusting attitudes and behaviors in the U.S. However, we have been heading here for decades. To alter where we are heading, we need to confront certain realities that media narratives distract attention from on a ritual basis. The first reality is that we have to focus our energies on helping citizens discern fact from fiction. Trump’s behavior is unequivocally reckless, but his rhetoric would have been unsuccessful sans a significant population whose material decline, after 50 years of neoliberal policies, became susceptible to the fake news that permeates the internet. Indeed, their behavior illuminates a rarely discussed aspect of so-called [fake news](#): it is particularly dangerous when it leads people to believe they must take aggressive actions they deem are morally justified. For example, the people at the Capitol would be heroes if there was actually well-sourced, demonstrable factual evidence that 2020 election was stolen. So too would the individual who shot up the restaurant in [Pizzagate](#), to expose a pedophilia ring. In both cases, individuals showed concern for children and democracy, but reacted to false or incomplete information. That is to say, someone is not necessarily a bad person for engaging with fake news, but it can lead them to engage in horrific behavior. We saw this from left leaning voters as well. When it came to [Russiagate](#), the Democrats repeatedly red-baited with the baseless and disproven claims that the Russians [aided](#) Bernie Sanders 2020 campaign, colluded with Trump’s [2016 campaign](#), shut down a [Vermont power plant](#), put a [bounty](#) on U.S. soldiers, [hacked](#) the Democratic Party’s emails in 2016, and released [Hunter Biden’s](#)

computer. People who engage with fake news are not bad people, but too often lack the skills to evaluate and analyze content critically.

The second reality is that those who chide Trump are often responsible for Trump. They have already extracted everything they needed from his presidency. Take [prominent Republicans](#) like Mike Pence, Lindsay Graham, and Mitch McConnell. They excused or ignored Trump's racism, classism, and sexism to get [tax cuts and judicial appointments](#). Similarly, [big-tech companies](#) reaped massive profits by creating a platform for Trump to build his electoral brand where his opponents could virtue signal against him. Only after Trump lost the election and threatened their business model with the repeal of [section 230](#) of the Communications Decency Act did they oppose him. Closely related, the corporate media, even the supposed "resistance" outlets like MSNBC, who owe their increased audience size and massive profits to Trump, have recently admitted that their existence depends upon [lazy and reckless](#) coverage of Trump. Perhaps a harbinger of what's to come is happening at Twitter. Just days after they dumped Trump from the popular social media platform, their stock plummeted by 10 percent, still down nearly seven percent at the close on Monday. These media companies helped create the need for a Trump figure to make profits, and as journalist [Matt Taibbi recently noted](#), this is another major reason why we need a new media system, one preferably of, by, and for *the public*, which was the topic of Victor Pickard's stellar book, *Democracy Without Journalism*.

The third reality we must all face is that Trump is a key symptom, not the cause, of declining democratic culture in the U.S. Trump would not be able to undermine the pillars of democracy if they had not already been in shambles. This is crucial to understand because a return to the "normal" politicians will do little if anything to slow the corrosion of democracy. The reality is that Trump's [fake news epithet](#) was effective because the news media had traded journalism for profiteering, partisanship, and political grandstanding decades ago. Trump's [faux populist](#) derision of elites found a sympathetic audience after policy failures such as NAFTA, the bogus justification for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the pre- and post-2008 economic collapse response, and their polling and analysis about the 2016 and 2020 elections. Worse, the so-called party of the people, [the Democratic Party's](#) (and Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, or DCCC) shifted their appeal to educated elite rather than the working class, as [Boots Riley](#) recently noted. This helps explain why [100 million Americans](#) refuse to vote because they feel that neither party speaks to their needs. In fact, "non-voters are less educated, poorer, and more likely to be minorities, single and women." By the 2014 polls showed the DCCC had its [lowest approval](#) rating ever resulting in the party holding less seats under President Barack Obama and Nancy Pelosi's leadership than any time since [1920](#). It is no wonder that in 2020, [Pelosi](#) proved to be such an effective bogeyperson for GOP [attack ads](#) that the DCCC lost seats in the [House of Representatives](#) (where she is the Speaker). If the U.S. hopes to avoid another, and more sophisticated version

of Trump, the neoliberal behaviors, attitudes, policies, and politicians of the last forty-years must be sent to the dustbin of history and studiously avoided moving forward.

The fourth reality is that we cannot censor our way back to a strong democracy. Censorship, a practice long associated with authoritarian regimes, is now embraced by those that oppose Trump. Censorship is dangerous because studies show that it not only fails to stop the targeted information, it popularizes the content in what is known as the [Streisand Effect](#), and punishes bystanders who experience a [chilling effect](#). The post- January 6th removal of Trump's social media accounts saw Democrats cheer just as they had a few years earlier when other right-wing accounts were removed. We find it difficult to celebrate censorship by algorithms and technocrats, especially given the impacts go far beyond right wing fringes as suppression of expression comes with major civic consequences. Furthermore, the actions of these big tech overlords amounts to censorship by proxy considering the Silicon Valley's wealth is dependent upon the federal government's [revolving door](#), [loans and innovation](#) such as the [internet](#), and contracts to [collect citizens' data](#) and [surveil them](#). Censorship by proxy defined the Second Red Scare which saw the federal government intimidate industry and collude with the Screen Actors Guild, through [Ronald Reagan](#), to develop the [Hollywood Blacklist](#). Rather, than censor we need to cultivate a populace who are invested in the society, have faith in a more transparently accountable system, and are equipped with the critical thinking skills to effectively evaluate and analyze content. History has been very clear that this will not come about by mocking, labeling, and censoring individuals or content.

Donald Trump has helped peel back the gilded veneer of democracy in America. His presidency has revealed what neoliberalism has wrought: a post-democratic U.S. ripe for fascism. Democracy ceases to exist unless the citizenry participates in and respects the process, put its faith in and defends public institutions, accepts verifiable electoral results, and attains the critical thinking and media literacy skills necessary to make well informed and sophisticated decisions. We cannot, and should not, return to normal, as by this point we are all too aware of what "normal" has wrought.

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