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Top Democrats Have Been Enabling Trump

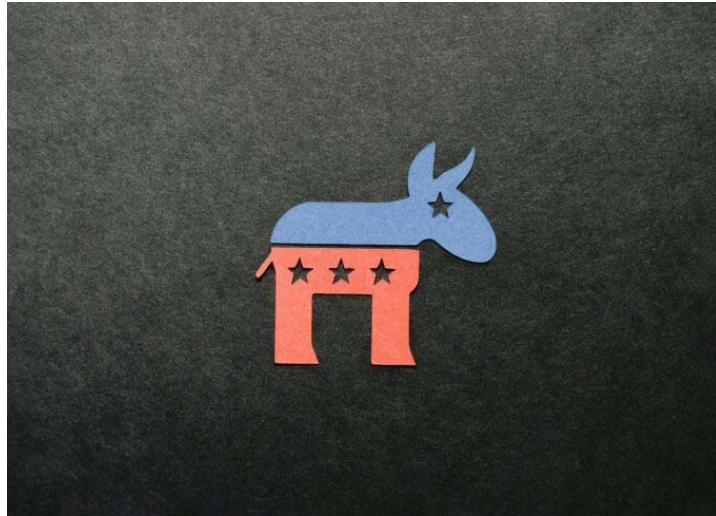


Image by Kelly Sikkema.

America desperately needs a united front to restrain the wrecking ball of the Trump regime. While outraged opposition has been visible and vocal, it remains a far cry from developing a capacity to protect what's left of democracy in the United States.

With the administration in its fourth month, the magnitude of the damage underway is virtually impossible for any individual to fully grasp. But none of us need a complete picture to understand that the federal government is now in the clutches of massively cruel and antidemocratic forces that have no intention of letting go.

Donald Trump's second presidential term has already given vast power to the most virulent aspects of the nation's far-right political culture. Its flagrant goals include serving oligarchy, dismantling civil liberties, and wielding government as a weapon against academic

freedom, civil rights, economic security, environmental protection, public health, workers' rights, and so much more.

The nonstop Trumpist assaults mean that ongoing noncooperation and active resistance will be essential. This is no time for what Martin Luther King, Jr., called “the paralysis of analysis.” Yet the past hugely matters. Repetition compulsions within the Democratic Party, including among self-described liberals and progressives, unwittingly smoothed the path for Trump’s return to power. Many of the same patterns, with undue deference to party leaders and their narrow perspectives, are now hampering the potential to create real leverage against MAGA madness.

“Fiscal Conservatism and Social Liberalism”

Today, more than three decades after the “New Democrats” triumphed when Bill Clinton won the presidency in 1992, an observation by *Washington Post* economics reporter Hobart Rowen days after that victory is still worth pondering: “Fiscal conservatism and social liberalism proved to be an effective campaign formula.” While campaigning with a call for moderate public investment, Clinton offered enough assurances to business elites to gain much of their support. Once elected, he quickly filled his economic team with corporate lawyers, business-friendly politicians, lobbyists, and fixers on loan from Wall Street boardrooms.

That Democratic formula proved to be a winning one — for Republicans. Two years after Clinton became president, the GOP gained control of both the House and Senate. Republicans maintained a House majority for the next 12 years and a Senate majority for 10 of them.

A similar pattern set in after the next Democrat moved into the White House. Taking office in January 2009 amid the Great Recession, Barack Obama continued with predecessor George W. Bush’s “practice of bailing out the bankers while ignoring the anguish their toxic mortgage packages caused the rest of us,” as journalist Robert Scheer pointed out. By the time Obama was most of the way through his presidency, journalist David Dayen wrote, he had enabled “the dispossession of at least 5.2 million U.S. homeowner families, the explosion of inequality, and the largest ruination of middle-class wealth in nearly a century.”

Two years into Obama’s presidency, his party lost the House and didn’t regain it for eight years. When he won reelection in 2012, Republicans captured the Senate and kept control of it throughout his second term.

During Obama’s eight years as president, the Democrats also lost upward of 900 seats in state legislatures. Along the way, they lost control of 30 legislative chambers, while the

Republican share of seats went from 44% to 56%. So GOP state legislators were well-positioned to gerrymander electoral districts to their liking after the 2020 census, making it possible for Republicans to just barely (but powerfully) gain and then retain their stranglehold on the House of Representatives after the 2022 and 2024 elections.

Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Kamala Harris in 2024 ran for president while sticking to updated versions of “fiscal conservatism, social liberalism,” festooning their campaigns with the usual trappings of ultra-mild populist rhetoric. Much of the media establishment approved, as they checked the standard Democratic boxes. But opting to avoid genuine progressive populism on the campaign trail meant enabling Trump to pose as a better choice for the economic interests of the working class.

Mutual Abandonment

The party’s orientation prevents its presidential nominees from making a credible pitch to be champions of working people. “It should come as no great surprise that a Democratic Party which has abandoned working class people would find that the working class has abandoned them,” Senator Bernie Sanders tweeted immediately after the 2024 election. “While the Democratic leadership defends the status quo, the American people are angry and want change.”

But there’s little evidence that the party leadership wants significant change, beyond putting themselves back in power. Midway through April, the homepage of the Democratic Party seemed like a snapshot of an institution still disconnected from the angst and anger of the electorate. A pop-up that instantly obscured all else on the screen featured a drawing of a snarling Donald Trump next to the headline: “We’re SUING Trump over two illegal executive orders.” Underneath, the featured message proclaimed: “We’re rolling up our sleeves and organizing for a brighter, more equal future. Together, we will elect Democrats up and down the ballot.” A schedule of town halls in dozens of regions was nice enough, but a true sense of urgency, let alone emergency, was notably lacking.

Overall, the party seems stuck in the mud of the past, still largely mired in the Joe Biden era and wary of opening the door too wide for the more progressive grassroots base that provides millions of small donations and volunteers to get out the vote (as long as they’re genuinely inspired to do so). President Biden’s unspeakably tragic refusal to forego running for reelection until far too late was enabled by top-to-bottom party dynamics and a follow-the-leader conformity that are still all too real.

On no issue has the party leadership been more tone-deaf — with more disastrous electoral and policy results — than the war in Gaza. The refusal of all but a few members of Congress

to push President Biden to stop massively arming the Israeli military for its slaughter there caused a steep erosion of support from the usual Democratic voters, as polling at the time and afterward indicated. The party's moral collapse on Gaza helped to crater Kamala Harris's vote totals among alienated voters reluctant to cast their ballots for what they saw as a war party, a perception especially acute among young people and notable among African Americans.

The Fact of Oligarchy

Pandering to potential big donors is apt to seem like just another day in elected office. A story about California Governor Gavin Newsom, often touted as a major Democratic contender for president in 2028, is in the category of "you can't make this stuff up." As reported by *Politico* this spring, he "is making sure California's business elite can call him, maybe. Roughly 100 leaders of state-headquartered companies have received a curious package in recent months: a prepaid, inexpensive cell phone... programmed with Newsom's digits and accompanied by notes from the governor himself. 'If you ever need anything, I'm a phone call away,' read one note to a prominent tech firm CEO, printed on an official letterhead, along with a hand-scrawled addendum urging the executive to reach out... It was Newsom's idea, a representative said, and has already yielded some 'valuable interactions.'" If, however, you're waiting for Newsom to send prepaid cell phones to activists working for social justice, telling them, "If you ever need anything, I'm a phone call away," count on waiting forever.

The dominance of super-wealthy party patrons that Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have been railing against at "Fighting Oligarchy" rallies has been coalescing for a long time. "In the American republic," wrote Walter Karp for *Harper's* magazine shortly before his death in 1989, "the fact of oligarchy is the most dreaded knowledge of all, and our news keeps that knowledge from us." Now, in the age of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg, the iron heel of mega-capital is at work swiftly crushing democratic structures, while top Democrats race to stay within shouting distance of the oligarchs.

A paradoxical challenge for the left is that it must take part in building a united front that includes anti-Trump corporatists and militarists, even while fighting against corporatism and militarism. What's needed is not capitulation or ultra-leftism, but instead a dialectical approach that recognizes the twin imperatives of defeating an increasingly fascist Republican Party while working to gain enough power to implement truly progressive agendas.

For those agendas, electoral campaigns and their candidates should be subsets of social movements, not the other way around. Still, here's one crystal-clear lesson of history: it's crucial who sits in the Oval Office and controls Congress. Now more than ever.

Fascism Would Stop Us All

A horrible reality of this moment: a fascist takeover of the government is within reach — and, if completed, any possibility of fulfilling a progressive agenda would go out the Overton window. The words of the young Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton, murdered in 1969 by the Chicago police (colluding with the FBI), ring profoundly true today: “Nothing is more important than stopping fascism, because fascism will stop us all.”

But much of the 2025 Democratic Party leadership seems willing to once again pursue the tried-and-failed strategy of banking on Trump to undo himself. Hakeem Jeffries and Chuck Schumer, the party leaders in the House and Senate, have distinctly tilted in that direction, as if heeding strategist James Carville's declaration that Democrats should not try to impede Trump's rampage against the structures of democracy.

“With no clear leader to voice our opposition and no control in any branch of government, it's time for Democrats to embark on the most daring political maneuver in the history of our party: roll over and play dead,” Carville wrote in late February. “Allow the Republicans to crumble beneath their own weight and make the American people miss us.” (Evidently impressed with his political acumen, the editors of the *New York Times* published the op-ed piece with that advice only four months after printing an op-ed he wrote in late October under this headline: “Three Reasons I'm Certain Kamala Harris Will Win.”)

As for the Democratic National Committee, it probably had nowhere to go but up in the wake of the chairmanship of Jaime Harrison, who for four years dutifully did President Biden's bidding. Now, with no Democratic president, the new DNC chair, Ken Martin, has significant power to guide the direction of the party.

In early April, I informed Martin that my colleagues and I at RootsAction were planning a petition drive for the full DNC to hold an emergency meeting. “The value of such a meeting seems clear for many reasons,” I wrote, “including the polled low regard for the Democratic Party and the need to substantively dispel the wide perception that the party is failing to adequately respond to the current extraordinary perils.” Martin replied with a cordial text affirming that the schedule for the 448-member DNC to convene remains the same as usual — twice a year — with the next meeting set for August.

The petition, launched in mid-April (co-sponsored by RootsAction and Progressive Democrats of America), urged the DNC to “convene an emergency meeting of all its

members — fully open to the public — as soon as possible... Business as usual must give way to truly bold action that mobilizes against the autocracy that Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and their cronies are further entrenching every day. The predatory, extreme, and dictatorial actions of the Trump administration call for an all-out commensurate response, which so far has been terribly lacking from the Democratic Party.”

No matter what, at this truly pivotal time, we must never give up.

As Stanley Kunitz wrote during the height of the Vietnam War:

In a murderous time

the heart breaks and breaks

and lives by breaking.

It is necessary to go

through dark and deeper dark

and not to turn.

While reasons for pessimism escalate, I often think of how on target my RootsAction colleague India Walton was in a meeting when she said, “The only hope is in the struggle.”

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This piece first appeared on [TomDispatch](#).

Norman Solomon is the national director of [RootsAction.org](#) and executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. His latest book, *War Made Invisible: How America Hides the Human Toll of Its Military Machine*, is published by The New Press.