

The Authoritarian Temptation

by Eric Chenoweth

In 1976, the French political theorist Jean François Revel warned of the “totalitarian temptation” in the West at a time when many intellectuals were attacking political democracy, often in favor of Soviet communism. Forty years later, the danger posed by Soviet communism is gone, but political democracy is again under severe threat, this time from an authoritarian temptation that has reached the United States.

Revel’s book, *La Tentation Totalitaire*, appeared at a crossroads in time. The Soviet Union was at the height of its military and economic strength and international influence. In the West, Eurocommunist parties were gaining popularity and a strong anti-American and anti-NATO sentiment was developing within non-communist parties on the Left. Revel sought to answer the question why certain political elites were so unwilling to defend Western political democracy, which tended towards economic and social equality, against totalitarianism. It was a political puzzle to Revel, a socialist and humanist. One had to be “inoculated to the virus of reality” not to see the clear evidence that the alternative model to Western democracy, communism, brought only mass political repression and economic misery.

Revel had a dark theory for this phenomenon: “Does there lurk in us a wish for totalitarian rule? If so, it would explain a great deal about how people behave, about the speeches they make, and the times they remain silent.” He concluded that many intellectuals aligned with radical parties were fully aware of the lack of freedom and prosperity in communist societies, but *preferred* a totalitarian option to what they had convinced themselves was a worse evil: the depravities of capitalism. He likened such behavior to Right intellectuals in the ‘30s who favored the political order of Nazi Germany to the decadence of their own societies.

To Revel’s relief, his fears of the “inevitable advance of Stalinism” were not born out. Communism’s appeal and international influence waned after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Polish government crackdown on the Solidarity trade union. “People power” movements successfully overthrew dictatorships in many countries around the world — what analysts called democracy’s “third wave.” Even in the Soviet bloc, cracks in the totalitarian power structure were broken open by dissident and opposition movements demanding human rights and independence. Soviet communism collapsed in 1989-91, ending the most significant challenge to Western democracy in the post-World War II era.

Yet Revel’s analysis of the internal weaknesses within democratic political systems remains highly relevant. Because somehow, even as Western democracy’s main ideological competitor has failed, it faces a new period of danger.

The threats are many. Democracy’s “third wave” has receded on the sands of time. Russia has reverted to imperial Soviet-like behavior. Communist China has built a successful hybrid model for authoritarian rule and is challenging the US and its democratic allies for dominance in Asia. The Arab Spring descended into a terrible winter of death, destruction, and dictatorship. Jihadist armies are waging terror campaigns on innocent populations throughout the Middle East and North Africa and carry out terrorist attacks on the US and Western Europe. These challenges —

and more — threaten freedom and cause international disorder and misery. But they are not the most serious threat to democracy today. As Revel warned at another time of international challenges, Western democracies are being threatened from within by the rise of home-grown authoritarian political forces. Nowhere is that peril more portentous and consequential than in the birthplace of modern democracy, the United States. There can be no worse threat certainly. We cannot expect that democracy can thrive or even survive in other places (much less expand in waves) if it fails in its most firmly established home.

The Authoritarian Candidate

We also cannot look away from the danger — although, just as before, many do. Donald Trump, a businessman with no other qualifications than wealth and celebrity, has run a successful campaign for the Republican nomination for president based on a nationalist platform and an appeal for strong-man leadership. In the country's political history, there have been other significant authoritarian candidates for president running as independents or third-party candidates, but none has had a serious chance to win the presidency. As the presumptive nominee of one of America's two major political parties, Donald Trump has a real chance to be president of the United States of America.

While many dismissed his candidacy, Trump was always a serious candidate with a serious platform. From the beginning, he exhibited a clear intention of winning the Republican Party's nomination and of remaking the Republican Party into his own political instrument. In order to achieve his goal, he adopted a traditional toolkit used by many authoritarians in the last century: chauvinism, militarism, preying on people's fears of national decline, blaming that decline on other political leaders, promising an idyllic vision for the future based on his unique individual abilities to lead the people, and encouraging mass adulation for a political savior of the nation. He was as clear-minded and dangerous as any authoritarian seeking power. It is worth reviewing Trump's political strategy.

To rally people behind him, Donald Trump set a nationalist theme to his campaign: "Make America Great Again." America, he claimed, had been made weak and was now a "third-world country," mired in debt and "losing" abroad. The country was "falling apart," in a condition of "disaster" and "national crisis." Its people have been made vulnerable to increasing crime and terrorist attacks by porous borders. Much of the reason for America's decline was foreign: dangerous illegal immigrants who "bring crime" and "take our jobs" (one of many self-contradictions) and other countries that unscrupulously stole American manufacturing capacity and were now overwhelming America with trade. But, as in other nations that had fallen from greatness, the real cause of national decline was its own elected leaders. They were "stupid," "pathetic," "weak," "false," "crooked," and "self-serving."

Trump presented himself as a leader who could "get things done" and get America back to "winning." Anyone with electoral experience, the main basis any democracy develops and tests its future leaders, could not solve the country's problems. Trump offered voters a new model of leadership — the only experience he has — that of building and directing a private business in domineering fashion. It was a large part of Trump's appeal: at every rally, he promised to run the country in a manner similar to the private business he has built and controlled. In an interview with *The New York Times* after being declared the presumptive Republican

nominee, Trump reiterated his authoritarian intentions, pledging to achieve his goals mainly by issuing executive orders and by establishing the presidency as the center of government. He continued to express contempt for elected political leaders, evinced little respect for (or understanding of) the constitutional order, and promised to put mostly businessmen and generals — that is, other people trained in and controlling non-democratic hierarchical structures — to carry out his domestic and foreign policy platform.

Trump's platform reflected his nationalist theme and his appeal for strong-man leadership. Since foreigners and foreign countries were one of the main reasons for America's decline, he promised to shut the country off from future illegal immigration, to deport non-legal immigrants, to ban Syrian refugees from entering the country, and to severely restrict foreign trade by imposing high tariffs. He also promised to rebuild the American military "so no one would mess with us" and to assert unilaterally American military force and strength (for example, by "bombing the shit out of ISIS").

Trump presented his authoritarian message in a classic and technologically novel manner: through mass rallies, mass media manipulation, and mass Tweets. Despite its disorganized appearance compared to other candidates, Trump's campaign was remarkably disciplined. The candidate travelled from large rally to large rally delivering the same message, presenting the same distorted universe as reality, adopting the same machismo style, and encouraging his followers at each stop to engage in mass adoration. It is tempting to describe Trump's speeches as incoherent. He appears to speak in stream of consciousness, saying whatever comes to mind. But his speeches had a clear design and in fact were quite repetitive. He did not vary the theme, message, or delivery one bit from rally to rally. He appealed to an overwhelming sense of victimization of those who feel their way of life has been taken away by foreign and alien forces. He warned that America will fall further into decline and a state of national collapse if he is not elected. And he promised to end the pain and humiliation his followers (and the nation) feel. "You'll be tired of winning so much," he claimed. He always encouraged sequential chants of nationalism ("USA," "USA," "USA") and mass adoration ("Trump," "Trump," "Trump"), thereby associating Trump with the salvation of the nation.

Although he has relied on the media for coverage, Trump has adopted the authoritarian's contempt for it. He whipped up emotion at his rallies by pointing out where the "disgusting media" was sitting, threatened to sue journalists who "slander" him, and promised to change the libel laws to prevent the press from writing "lies" in the future. Yet, despite his frequent threats to restrict media freedom, the media have succumbed to Trump's manipulations throughout the long campaign. He offered himself frequently to various national news outlets for interviews and used his Twitter account with millions of followers to fuel stories of his campaign on a daily basis. His tactics for generating publicity and "dominating the news cycle" were also from the authoritarian toolkit: bullying and insulting opponents, making threats, exaggerating for political effect, and stating outrageous things that fell outside the usual American political dialogue but appealed to the fears, insecurities, and prejudices of his followers. Trump's strategy and tactics worked richly. *The New York Times* estimates that he received \$2 billion worth of free television and radio advertising during the long nomination process.

The Gravity of the Danger

There is now an argument whether Trump fits the profile of a fascist. Fascism, however, was a coherent ideology of state power that served the purpose of mobilizing loyal supporters behind the destruction of the existing political order and the establishment of totalitarian state structures. Fascist leaders generally sought imperial conquest, regional expansion, and even world domination. Thus, comparisons of Trump to last century's fascists tend to be dismissed as simplistic exaggerations. In a *New York Times* article addressing the subject, the former Republican leader Newt Gingrich pedantically pointed out that Trump had no brown shirts and does not enunciate any clear ideology or imperialist vision. He, a backer of Trump, therefore criticized the analogy as "ignorant" and "morally repugnant."

Yet, as Revel noted, it is neither ignorant nor morally repugnant to identify elements of either fascism or communism within the behavior or speeches of anti-democratic political leaders. Responsible citizens are obligated to point out the danger those leaders pose to democracy. Trump is an authoritarian politician whose themes, platform, campaign strategy, and political tactics do indeed have elements of fascist political movements. Trump has even adopted the phrase "America First" — the slogan and name of the political movement that was led by a Nazi sympathizer and advocated appeasement of Hitler's Germany in 1939-41 — as the main thematic description of both his domestic and foreign policy.

Some analysts downplay the danger Trump poses by arguing that the American constitutional system is too entrenched for him to undermine it. This is naïve. As Adam Gopnik points out in *The New Yorker*, "[authoritarians] do not arrive in office and discover, as constitutionalists do, that their capabilities are more limited than they imagined. They arrive, and then make their power as large as they can." Authoritarianism is not, like totalitarianism, a fixed ideological system of state power, but rather a phenomenon of individuals gaining political power with a clear aim to dominate and control the state. The 21st century has already seen many examples of non-democratic and anti-democratic governance and leadership. In many of those examples, elections were the first step to establishing such rule. Trump could establish another such example. It is what he is promising to do.

The authoritarian danger to the United States is real. And, due to the current status of the United States as the world's pre-eminent military and economic power, the danger is global. Already, as Anne Applebaum points out in *The Washington Post*, the success of Trump has weakened American democracy as a political model in the world and diminished America's standing and potential for world leadership. Yet, it is what Trump promises to do as president that is most alarming. As a candidate thus far, he has picked fights with leaders of democratic allies, questioned the purpose of America's democratic alliances, and proposed the spread of nuclear arms as a means for other nations to defend themselves. In statements and speeches, he has in essence declared himself to be (like Putin) an opponent of the international liberal world order and promises to seek deals with dictatorships as an organizing principle for his "America First" doctrine. But the doctrine he outlined in his "major foreign policy address" is neither isolationist nor realist: it is simply a return to nation against nation. Such a doctrine of disorder opens up any number of possibilities for world crises that Trump's orientation and behavior indicate would

result in impulsive actions lacking any basis in diplomacy, international law, or recent political precedent. The potential results are as terrifying as any previous threat to the world's survival.

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Many writers and publications are finally going beyond anodyne analyses for explaining the rise of Trump (populism, voter anger at the establishment, the desire for an outsider to “shake things up”) and pointing more and more to the authoritarian characteristics of Trump and his campaign. Yet, political elites and the media continue to downplay the larger danger that the candidate represents, namely the following he has engendered through his campaign.

Many of Trump's followers were drawn to him by his bullying and vulgar displays of wealth and power (as witnessed on “The Apprentice” and professional wrestling shows). He gained their political support with crude and bigoted statements about immigrants and promising to shut the border with Mexico by building “a beautiful wall.” Trump recognized the nature of his political base and encouraged his followers to use violence at his rallies against protesters and carry out mass intimidation campaigns on the internet against individuals who wrote negatively about him. These digital campaigns generally included various ugly threats and racist, anti-Semitic, anti-gay, and other hate speech.

But what has elevated the gravity of the threat is that Trump's poll numbers and election results rose each time he raised the bar of his authoritarian pledges: to ban *all* Muslims from entering the country; to deport *all* 11 million illegal immigrants (it would be “easy”); to use waterboarding and “much much worse” torture on terrorism suspects. It was with such promises that Trump secured the majority of delegates for the Republican nomination.

As “anti-establishment” voters coalesced around Trump with the increasing brutality of his promises, the existing political, financial, and intellectual foundations within the Republican Party were unable to thwart his candidacy. Many Republican members of Congress, governors, and state legislators openly opposed Trump. The *National Review*, *Weekly Standard*, *Commentary* and the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as many well-known columnists, frequently attacked Trump for his bigoted statements, anti-immigrant policies, alarming foreign policy pronouncements, and for not being a “real” conservative. A significant movement of donors, politicians, and conservative publications and thinkers organized a “Never Trump” movement. All of it was to no effect.

A large part of the voting population has now chosen the most authoritarian Republican candidate for president and decisively rejected all non-authoritarian alternatives. In so doing, Trump is in fact building an authoritarian political movement. Trump has now received around 15 million votes all told. While this amounts to just about 12 percent of the total electorate in a national presidential election, these voters now represent the majority of one of America's two main political parties. The Trump delegates they have chosen to the Republican Party's convention now control the future of that party.

Resisting the Authoritarian Temptation

The authoritarian danger posed by Donald Trump is thus both real and large. And it is occurring in the world's most established democracy, a country whose democratic existence and leadership are essential to democracy's fortunes throughout the world and to the hope of defeating anti-democratic and anti-civilizational threats now arrayed against democratic nations. If the danger is so clear and so ominous, why is so much of the Republican Party's political establishment, much of which opposed Trump's candidacy, now ready to accommodate to Trump and Trumpism? And why are those who refuse to accommodate themselves to Trump advocating political strategies that can only enhance Trump's chances of winning the general election?

The degree of political irresponsibility is differing. Accommodating to and endorsing Donald Trump is supporting the authoritarian choice for president. Republican leaders use the excuse of party loyalty for their decision. But it is a fool's loyalty. The Republican Party of Donald Trump will not remain the party that these leaders are loyal to. Indeed, Trump has expressed open contempt for the previous platform of the Republican Party and all recent Republican Party leaders (starting with Ronald Reagan). These current leaders are thus accommodating themselves to a new Republican Party with a new authoritarian leader having a clear constituency among Republican Party and independent voters. It will not be possible to refashion back this new party to its old form after such accommodation.

To their credit, many anti-Trump Republicans and conservatives refuse to accommodate themselves, but they are advocating ineffective alternative strategies to meeting the political danger confronting us, such as an election boycott or a third-party candidacy. Even if the effect of such strategies were to reduce or split the Republican vote and Trump were defeated —itself hardly certain — both strategies still serve to decrease the level of Trump's electoral defeat, thereby increasing the likelihood that Trump (and, more importantly, Trumpism) will establish a permanent foothold in the Republican Party.

The actions of the non-accommodationists and accommodationists have the same source. Both groups have translated their differences in political ideology and policies with the Democratic Party and its presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton, into something so consequential and so unpalatable that it is presented as worse than (or as equally bad as) that posed by Trump. This political behavior is truly puzzling. Accommodationists and non-accommodationists alike expressed their recognition of how dangerous Donald Trump is to American democracy and the world's security. They described him as psychologically unstable, a megalomaniac, a pathological liar, a racist, and a con man. They attacked his platform as wholly incongruous with American democracy, the American constitution, and Republican Party principles. They expressed true alarm at Trump's America First doctrine and his having the codes to use America's nuclear weapons.

The Democratic Party nominee has many flaws certainly — most politicians do in any democracy. Yet Hillary Clinton's record, policies, positions, and temperament all conform to a democratic standard. It is the only standard needed for opposing an authoritarian candidate. Whatever her limitations or transgressions she does not advocate an authoritarian platform or exhibit fascistic characteristics. In fact, her platform is generally recognized as being centrist. Her experience is recognized as meeting the qualifications for the serious position she is seeking.

In the end, her record of self-serving statements, changes in political positions, and political mistakes is rather ordinary (especially when compared with some recent political behavior and scandals involving both Republicans and Democrats). To be sure, for conservatives and Republicans there are unwanted political and ideological consequences to a Clinton presidency. But these would be limited by a functioning opposition party and reversible in a functioning democracy. The consequences of a Trump victory are irreversible.

One wonders, then, if Revel's thesis applies now. To paraphrase, "Does there lurk in us a wish for authoritarian rule?" Has a significant part of America's political class and citizenry convinced itself that political rule under Trump is preferable to a continuation of what they have come to believe to be the depravities of American democracy? "If so," as Revel writes, "it would explain a great deal about how people behave, about the speeches they make, and the times they remain silent." I have focused on the Republican response to Trump but the authoritarian temptation exists on both sides of the ideological divide. A number of supporters of Bernie Sanders are in the same "Never Hillary" camp and express the incredible view from a Left perspective that Clinton is somehow a worse choice (or no worse) than Trump.

Revel argued that rejecting anti-democratic political parties and leaders and opposing anti-democratic speech and behavior is a moral imperative in a democracy — otherwise democracy is weakened. That moral imperative exists now as America faces a genuine authoritarian danger. If one supports democracy and if one recognizes the clear danger that Trump and Trumpism pose to American democracy, the only responsible political behavior is to seek to defeat Donald Trump in the general election as decisively as possible and to repudiate as fully as possible the authoritarian politics he represents.

This is what French voters did in 2002 facing a similar threat, the surprising appearance in a second-round run-off for the presidency of the proto-fascist and anti-Semite Jean Marie Le Pen. The Socialist Party (and other parties on the Left) encouraged their followers to vote for their ideological rival, Gaullist Jacques Chirac. France's intellectual elite appealed for a united front against Le Pen. French citizens joined anti-Le Pen rallies in the millions and, on polling day, gave Chirac the most decisive electoral victory — 82 percent of the vote — for any candidate for the presidency in France's history.

Given the importance of the US to safeguarding democracy's fortunes and international security, Trump poses a much graver danger than Le Pen. American voters should have then an equal determination as French voters exhibited in 2002: to make the general election a referendum on Donald Trump's candidacy and to show that the largest majority possible opposes his authoritarian politics and is willing to vote in favor of the clear democratic alternative. One can hope that the current period proves similar to the times Revel confronted in 1976 — a crossroads, a point when authoritarianism and the authoritarian temptation reached its zenith in the Republican Party candidacy of Donald Trump to become president of the United States. One can hope that the next era will be a determined push for democracy's revival in the US and in the world. That will be possible only if Americans do not ignore or diminish the danger they now face.

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