

# The Present Danger (revised)

by Eric Chenoweth

Editorial boards of newspapers have become the most responsible civic voices in this year's US presidential election. Conservative, centrist, liberal and left newspapers have determined that Donald Trump, the Republican Party's nominee, is bigoted, serially and pathologically untruthful, corrupt, dangerously intemperate, megalomaniacal, ignorant, a threat to national and world security, and (as *The Washington Post* put it) a "unique danger to American democracy." Nearly all, including a number of conservative and pro-Republican newspapers, have endorsed the other major party nominee as the clear democratic (small d) alternative to an authoritarian candidate. They have joined public figures like former Republican Senator John Warner in making clear that America's national security (and the world's security) rests on electing Hillary Clinton. Unfortunately, too many American citizens are ignoring these responsible voices.

Donald Trump and the Trump campaign's determined effort to undermine, sabotage, and hijack American democracy through slogans, false promises, gross propaganda, and political distraction remain a clear threat. Trump went on unfiltered display before 84 million viewers in last Monday night's debate between the two major party candidates to demonstrate fully his ignorance, incompetence and unfitness for office. He further restated patent untruths and re-committed himself to simplistic and authoritarian solutions to the nation's problems. Despite all this, broadcast media (as well as news divisions of print media like *The New York Times*) have normalized this performance as a legitimate "debate" in which Trump "won" the first part on substance (trade) and Clinton "won" on "temperament." The media continue to fail in their job to make clear to the American people the threat that Trump presents, continue to capitulate and perpetuate the lies and false reality that Trump has based his candidacy on (the entire first part of the debate), and continue to ignore the true nature of the racist and anti-Semitic base of support that Trump has relied on to propel him so close to seizing the most powerful leadership position on the planet. As the Republican nominee for president, he remains — and continues to be presented as — a viable candidate with a clear chance of winning the election. Even after his debate and post-debate performance, he retains more than 40 percent support in polls.

A number of conservatives have taken a principled stand in this election and endorsed Hillary Clinton (as [Dorothy Rabinowitz](#), a *Wall Street Journal* editorial board member, recently did). But most conservatives are seduced by "[The Authoritarian Temptation](#)," a fixated ideological opposition to the "other" that has led them to prefer or accept an authoritarian outcome to a democratic one in an American presidential election. Former *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz endorses Trump as "the lesser evil." Bill Bennett has crafted an intellectual foundation for Trumpism (read the statement of purpose of America Strong) and put together a group of traditional, paleo- and neo-conservatives into Writers and Scholars for Trump. Many who led a "Never Trump" movement in the primary have added a "Never Hillary" position, which by any logic negates their previous stance ("Never Hillary" means electing Donald Trump, not the unknown Evan McMullin, the supposed conservative "vote of conscience"). William Kristol, the editor of *The Weekly Standard* and leader of the "Never Trump" movement, now asserts "we will survive" a Trump presidency.

There is and remains a present danger to American democracy.

Donald Trump is an explicitly authoritarian candidate promising voters that he will “fix” a “broken system” (American democracy) by running the country like a business and exerting executive powers beyond any previous precedent (that is, by undermining the country’s 240-year constitutional foundations). To win the Republican nomination, he built a political movement based on the racist support he gained over five years by championing the white supremacist-and conspiracy theorist-driven “birther” lie that President Barack Obama, America’s first African American president, was not a legitimate citizen of the United States. He expanded that base of support by waging a bigoted, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-trade, militarist, pro-torture, “America First” primary campaign. The authoritarian basis of Trump’s candidacy can be easily recognized in Trump’s repeated messaging in favor of Russian dictator Vladimir Putin and his regular repetition of Russian propaganda. All of it should be seen in Trump’s choices to run his campaign: Paul Manafort, the paid henchman of a Ukrainian dictator, and now Steve Bannon, the editor of the “alt-right,” “anti-globalist,” anti-Semitic Breitbart News. These are the people (along with the third-rank Republican surrogates who daily propagate lies and false reality to the country) on whom a President Trump will rely to carry out his platform.

As a second national debate between the two major candidates approaches, it is important to continue to lay out what the media capitulates and what the Republican Party is appeasing, normalizing and affirming every day in the candidacy of Donald Trump. His general election campaign has included pledges of the mass deportation of 2 million non-citizens “in the first hour” of his presidency (“they’re gone”); the regularized use of torture, extra-judicial killings of innocents, and responding “in kind” to the barbarism of ISIS; an end to current trade agreements and relationships; the transformation of mutual defense treaties of democratic allies into a monetary-based protection system; aligning the country with dictatorship (“wouldn’t it be beautiful if we got along with Russia”) and abandoning America’s role as leader of the free world (Trump’s America First doctrine); the wholesale barring of travelers to this country from all countries “compromised by terrorism,” including much of Europe (the “constitutional” means to adhere to an earlier pledge to bar all Muslims from entering the US); the institution of an invasive stop-and-frisk regime as a national policing strategy to “restore law and order”; the imperialist seizures of oil of foreign countries America has invaded; barring free media from covering the White House; and much, much more.

All of these pledges and stances of the candidate have been normalized in the media’s coverage and in the Republican Party’s efforts to win the election at all costs. It is now normal that more than 40 percent of American voters are consistently stating their intent to vote for a candidate making such pledges, taking such stances, and daily waging a new anti-democratic politics in which truth, reality and basic moral values and political civility no longer have meaning. A moral equivalency has been established between Trump’s authoritarianism and the personal, ethical, and professional flaws of an imperfect but otherwise democratic candidate who has made no similar authoritarian pledges, did not violate laws or compromise America’s national security, and demonstrates clear fitness for the presidency, knowledge of policy, a willingness to work with members of the other major political party, and a commitment to the country’s constitutional foundations and its international system of alliances with democratic nations.

When faced with such a threat and the failure of democratic institutions to protect the country from real peril (see my article [How Democracies Perish](#)), we should continually and repeatedly answer the authoritarian politics of this candidate and his determined supporters (see also my [Open Letter to an American Citizen](#)). Most importantly, though, the American citizenry must stand up and re-affirm democracy through its most fundamental right — the right to vote. As French voters did in 2002 by uniting behind a democratic candidate (Jacques Chirac) against their authoritarian danger (Jean Marie Le Pen), American citizens should decisively repudiate Donald Trump and his political movement and register overwhelming support for the democratic alternative in this election.

If we do not do so, if we remain silent, if we do not re-affirm American democracy, it will no longer be possible to support and promote courageous democrats abroad struggling for freedom.

October 7, 2016

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