

“The main thing is, they’re talking about us.”  
Joseph Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries*

## Can It Happen Here?

### Donald Trump and the Fracturing of America’s Constitutional Order

by Eric Chenoweth

Comparing Trump’s presidency with past fascist regimes, and particularly that of Hitler’s Germany, is generally seen as partisan hyperbole. Past warnings of a Nazi-like leader taking hold in America — like Sinclair Lewis’s ironically titled *It Can’t Happen Here* — were belied by history. America’s constitutional system can withstand even Trump. Can’t it?

The Trump presidency is certainly not the emergent Third Reich. Adolph Hitler, once handed power, acted swiftly to supplant the existing constitution by emergency decree, directed widespread repression against political opponents, purged Jews from state institutions, and held elections and referenda under conditions of mass intimidation to cement Nazi rule. By contrast, America saw three years of generally unhindered political opposition, media criticism, and free (if flawed) elections in which an opposition party made serious gains.

Yet, events keep giving resonance to those warnings about Donald Trump and his rise to power — as presently. In response to national protests over police violence against African Americans, Trump had peaceful demonstrators in front of the White House attacked and ordered the military to “expand the battlespace” to U.S. soil. What *is* happening here?

Several recent histories of Weimar Germany and Hitler’s rise to power make analogies to that of Donald Trump more credible — even acute.<sup>1</sup> Considering the prospect of Trump’s re-election, their insights point to an alarming level of danger that too many still dismiss.<sup>2</sup>

Comparisons do jump out: Trump’s reliance on myths of national betrayal and decline to pursue political power; his use of existing and new forms of media to dominate news and politics; the holding of mass rallies to build a political movement; the subordination of a national party to a dominant leader asserting sole capacity to save the nation. It is striking how many similarities one can identify. While these aspects of Trump’s political playbook are usually defined as generic populism, it is their specific similarity to Germany’s actual example that resound.

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<sup>1</sup> Among those reviewed here are *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-19* (Cambridge University Press: 2016); *The Death of Democracy: Hitler’s Rise to Power and the Fall of the Weimar Republic* by Benjamin Carter Hett (St. Martin’s Griffin, New York: 2018); and *Hitler’s First Hundred Days* by Peter Fritzsche (Basic Books, New York: 2020).

<sup>2</sup> One example is Samuel Moyn, in *The New York Review of Books*, “The Danger of Comparisons,” May 19, 2020. He critiques (with some merit) the misuses of historical analogy to fascism and Nazi Germany. Moyn overcompensates, however, blithely predicting Trump’s defeat and dismissing any danger to a future nullity. Such expectation of Trump’s defeat in 2016, it might be remembered, helped lead to his victory.

## The Accommodation of Extremism: Two Examples

Among the interesting aspects of the new histories of the Weimar Republic and its fall is the emerging consensus that it was not a failed political system. Nor should it be viewed as “doomed from the start” as most previous scholarship did. Rather, Mark Jones argues in *Founding Weimar*, the political order that emerged from the collapse of Kaiser Wilhelm’s Second Reich — a truly failed regime — was “among the strongest to emerge from the ruins of the Imperial system in central and eastern Europe.” Out of war and revolution, a “state-of-the-art modern democracy” was established, states Benjamin Carter Hett in his history of Weimar Germany, *The Death of Democracy*. The 1919 Constitution, he writes, provided for a “scrupulously just proportional electoral system and protection for individual rights and freedoms, expressly including the equality of men and women.” A range of democratic parties and capable political leaders emerged, power changed hands, German culture thrived, and basic welfare provisions adopted. These achievements were attained despite heavy war reparations, an economic crisis in 1923, and other challenges. As Mark Jones writes, Weimar Germany “proved its resilience.”

The recurrent question of historians then, Hett writes, is “How could this have happened?” Was Hitler’s rise an inexorable force of history? Peter Fritsche contends it was not. In *Hitler’s First Hundred Days*, he writes that up to the last moment, “There was nothing inevitable about the appointment of Hitler on January 30, 1933 or self-evident about Germany’s Nazi future.”

In his diaries, Joseph Goebbels had repeated entries where he wrote “The main thing is, they’re talking about us.” The “they” could refer to media and society generally but also to political and business establishment leaders and sometimes specifically to leaders in less extreme nationalist parties sharing a negative view of the Weimar Republic. “Us” meant not just the Nazi Party but also its embodiment in Adolph Hitler, a megalomaniac claiming to be the savior of a German nation threatened by Jews, Bolsheviks and globalism. It was Goebbels’s task to force “them” — those whose acceptance was necessary to achieve power — to talk about “us” as partners.

The new histories remind us how much Hitler and the Nazi party, even with its seemingly indomitable force, needed such acceptance. “They” considered Hitler to be a clown and his followers as ruffians. *Mein Kampf* was seen as the rambling of the leader of a pitiful “beer hall putsch.” Even as the Nazi Party, seizing on conditions of an economic crisis, increased its vote from 3 percent in the 1928 parliamentary elections to 37 percent in July 1932, Hitler could gain power only in a parliamentary coalition or by a presidentially appointed cabinet. No party would agree to form a parliamentary majority with Hitler as leader. And Paul von Hindenburg, the venerable World War I general who retained the presidency in a run-off election with Hitler, vowed never to name the lowly “private” to be Chancellor.

Nazi support seemed to have crested with a significant drop in support in November elections, held due to a continued parliamentary stand-off. Still, on January 30, 1933, Hindenburg broke his vow in naming a new presidential cabinet. The reason was that a significant enough part of the German nationalist and military establishment had acceded to Hitler’s unwavering demand for the leading government post in an anti-Weimar coalition. After the Reichstag Fire, Hindenburg then acceded to Hitler’s demand for rule by emergency decree. With the adoption of

mass repression, the Third Reich was born. To get to this point of power, however, Hitler had needed the political accommodation that Goebbels achieved for him through media and staged spectacles. What later was seen as inevitable was the result initially of fateful choices made by less extreme, non-fanatical leaders to abandon democracy and accommodate extremism in the mistaken expectation they could use Hitler for their own purposes.

Trump, too, was broadly seen as a political clown, unfit to wield power (still a common view that disregards his will to use it). He also built a base of political support on a racist conspiracy theory (“birtherism”). He increased his support using additional racist and conspiratorial themes, promoting an anti-immigrant and anti-globalist nationalist platform under the banner of Make America Great Again. His politics were dismissed as fringe and bigoted by his leading political competitors for the Republican Party nomination.

Trump required first tolerance and then acceptance of an extremist platform attracting fanatical support by the political party whose presidential nomination he sought. Using broadcast and social media, staged rallies, provocative statements, and encouragement of violence, Trump practiced the Goebbels tactic of getting “them” talking about “us.” It gained him saturation coverage of his campaign and led “them” (media, elites, and leading figures in the Republican Party) to legitimize Trump’s “populist” brand of politics even as he grew more extreme. One by one, fellow candidates conceded to Trump’s seemingly unstoppable momentum. No effort was made to coalesce behind a remaining candidate with less extreme views — despite others performing better in national polls against the opposing party’s likely candidate.

As in Germany, there was nothing inevitable about the nomination of Donald Trump nor the full consolidation of an entire political party around an egomaniacal and extremist candidate. Republican Party leaders at national, state and local levels, seeking for their own purposes to regain national power after eight years, chose to tolerate Trump’s extremism and alarming behavior. As a result, the candidate once considered anathema over time became “exactly the right leader for our times.”

### ***The Lie as the Basis for Politics***

One of the more salient comparisons of Trump’s rise with that of Hitler is the use of the lie for political purposes. It defines more fully the extremist nature and appeal of Trump’s politics.

Goebbels directed the Nazi and state media to help craft Hitler’s rise and consolidation of power. His success is often attributed to the use of the “Big Lie.” Goebbels actually is recorded to have used the term only once in reference to British leaders. He took the phrase from Hitler’s outlandish explanation in *Mein Kampf* for how an international Jewish conspiracy could control the world. Hitler stated that “[T]he broad masses more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie” since “in the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility.” The reason, he was unabashed to say, was that “they themselves tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods.” The Big Lie gives protective cover in its scope.

Both Nazi leaders were projecting their own foundational practices. “Adolph Hitler lied all the time,” writes Hett, as did Goebbels. Hitler’s political rise, of course, was based on his own “big lie” as presented in *Mein Kampf*: a total confabulation in which the German nation was betrayed, its existence threatened, and its power suppressed by nefarious forces that were explainable only by a Bolshevik and Jewish conspiracy for world domination. The big lie gave cover to all manner of falsehoods to achieve power and carry out an extremist world vision. “[T]he essential paradox,” Hett writes, is “Hitler also said clearly what he was doing and what he planned to do.”

Donald Trump, too, lies all the time — a practice compounded by media trumpets and enablers in the Republican Party. The lies are legion, daily and also foundational to how Trump practices politics and carries out the presidency. Some describe the lies as purposeful distraction (“watch what they do, not what they say,” advises MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow). Others (including Trump) argue they are excusable means for achieving legitimate policy goals (“truthful exaggeration” or “alternative facts” in Trump parlance). Both descriptions mistake effect for cause. The lie is the basis for what Trump tells us he is doing and plans to do. The lie governs.

Take the case of immigration policy. A supposed unstoppable flood of criminal aliens from Mexico and Central America is falsely claimed to pose a dire threat to the nation’s economy and identity — even its existence. Therefore, extreme policies must be adopted to stop the “invasion,” including by anti-constitutional means. Build a 2,000 mile, 45-foot high wall to keep “illegals” from entering the country (a scale of border protection unseen since China in the Middle Ages). Expel undocumented immigrants, no matter the number or human consequence. Force asylum seekers to wait across the border to be subjected to violence. When denied border wall funding by Congress, shut down the federal government for a month. When that fails, declare a non-existent national emergency to misappropriate funds from other departments.

The lies govern policy and propel action at the cost of lives, money, the Constitution, and international treaties. These lies are not small or “spin” to justify partisan policy. They form part of the Big Lie: a foundational framework of false belief used to gain and retain power.

Trump’s Big Lie is also grand. He claims a rigged and corrupt political system betrayed the nation and brought economic decline; imperiled its core identity and health by allowing an influx of drugs and criminal migrants across the border; and rendered the U.S. internationally weak through terrible trade agreements, non-reciprocal alliances, and feckless wars. Only Trump, an outsider, could challenge this “stupid” system, protected by Republican and Democratic elites alike (“the swamp”), to save the country. “Only I can fix it,” he stated. This grand framework was repeated at every campaign stop, the convention, and his inaugural address (prompting former President George W. Bush to state “that was some weird shit”). It is now the foundational belief system of Trump’s followers, his political party, and his administration.

Conservative radio, Fox News and Republican leaders previously worked to promote a similar right-wing ideology. Many elements for Trump’s Big Lie existed within a rich panoply of propaganda and conspiracy theorizing (such as that an organized entity called “the Left” controls American culture and thus its politics). It included policy elements found within the Republican Party’s think tank infrastructure (such as restricting immigration, enacting tax cuts and reducing

the regulatory state). Yet, all actors in this political universe acknowledge it was Donald Trump who molded these elements into a new ideological framework (“Make America Great Again”) and convinced a major national party to adopt exclusionist, nationalist and authoritarian policies. Conservative “thinkers” have rushed to provide a theoretical underpinning.<sup>3</sup>

Using lies and a Big Lie framework as the basis for governance has a certain logic. As Goebbels and Hitler practiced it, the lie is internalized. The less that truth is the basis for politics, the more one must lie. The more one lies, the more it forms the basis for one’s own truth. The more a party’s platform and governance is based on lies, the more followers must adopt those lies and the new truth to support the party and its leader. Since the lies become foundational to the practice of politics, the will to power is indistinguishable from belief. It is just so here.

### **Tolerance of Extremism and the Formation of Political Identity**

Another characteristic of the political accommodation toward Hitler was the normalization of his extremism and its adoption by his followers.

The degree to which Nazism in Germany was consented to, versus submitted to, is still debated, as Peter Fritsche notes in *Hitler’s First Hundred Days*. Given Hitler’s swift use of terror and repression, historians of the Third Reich are wary to denote “genuine belief” as the basis of overt acts of support, such as the 43 percent voting for the Nazi party in March 1933 elections allowing it to form a majority coalition in parliament or the 90 percent support in two national referenda that November to bring about full Nazi political control and withdrawal from the League of Nations.

Fritsche offers insightful description for how parts of German society and politics gradually tolerated and then accepted the unmitigated extremism of Hitler and his followers in the years before 1933. Normal citizens adopted ideas of national betrayal and underhanded Jewish influence. They explained away violent attacks on Social Democrats, Communists and Jews as understandable acts of retribution against political enemies. Listening to the mass rallies on radio, they began to appreciate Hitler’s “genius.” Within a brief period of Hitler’s rule, Fritsche concludes, “most Germans preferred the Nazi future to the Weimar past” and “came to identify their own prospects” with the new regime.

The tolerance of Trump’s rise has similarity. Trump never moderated his positions; nor did his followers. In fact, enthusiasm for Trump grew as he adopted ever more extremist policies. Expel *all* undocumented immigrants (“on the first day, they’re gone”). Ban *all* Muslims from entering the U.S. “Bomb the shit out of them.” “Take the oil.” As he stoked his followers into chants of “build the wall” and “lock her up,” the media and Republican party leaders came to explain such extremism as some form of reasonable political response to porous borders and government

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<sup>3</sup> Most Republican oriented think-tanks re-ordered their programs to justify the MAGA/America First platform and its policy implementation under the Trump Administration. New publications like *American Greatness* have joined stalwarts like the *Claremont Review of Books* and *National Review* to publish manifold “conservative” defenses of Trumpism. Gabriel Schoenfeld, a Never Trump conservative, is a frequent critic of this intellectual pretzel-twisting. See, for example, “[The Neo-Nationalist Danger](#),” in *The American Interest*, June 21, 2019.

corruption. Trump himself became viewed as a candidate with “unique political instincts” for reaching voters, not as someone building a dangerous extremist movement.

Republican Party voters and leaders were not alone in their accommodation. Even within the Democratic Party, support of Trump is often explained as white working class voters feeling abandoned or alienated by an “identity-based” (one might say integrated) political party. It is argued that the entrenchment of 90-95 percent support among Republicans and 40-45 percent among eligible voters is not a function of accommodation to extremism, but a reflection of political “tribalism” — a neutral description for political division. All such explanations have tended to conclude that Trump is a symptom of economic disparities and a frayed political culture or that he is a mirror (not a projection) of a worldwide populist phenomenon.

These are justifications, more than explanations, for why non-extremist voters would cast ballots for an extremist presidential candidate with a fanatical following. After all, economic distress and political alienation did not cause most *non*-white voters, who had equal or greater economic distress and justification for political alienation, to cast ballots for an extremist candidate. Claims of legitimate grievance also do not explain why such support would remain entrenched in the face of extreme and anti-constitutional behavior, such as the kidnapping and caging of thousands of children to deter their parents from applying for asylum, or extorting a foreign ally for political favors to help in re-election, or willful inaction in response to a pandemic causing mass unnecessary death.<sup>4</sup> There is no fixed political law of “tribalism” to explain accommodation to extremist policies or behavior. There really is only tolerance and acceptance of extremism.

### **Lingua Trumpi: Accommodation Through Language**

Viktor Klemperer, a Jewish professor purged from Dresden University in 1935, offers additional explanation for the process of accommodation we have witnessed. In *The Language of the Third Reich*, Klemperer observes how German society came to accept the tenets of Nazism. Watching closely his neighbors and co-workers, Klemperer concluded it “was not the individual speeches of Hitler or Goebbels” that affected people most. They never truly paid attention to the content when broadcast on radio. Rather, the “most powerful propaganda tool” of the Nazis was specific language, what he called the *Lingua Tertii Imperii* or LTI. He writes,

Nazism permeated the flesh and blood of the people through single words, idioms, and sentence structures that were imposed on them in a million repetitions and absorbed mechanically and unconsciously.

Betrayal, conspiracy, the lying press, national community, purity, heroism, valiance — these and other words and idioms imprinted themselves on the general population, thus helping Nazi doctrine to gain acceptance. One may make a similar observation of how Trumpism has become increasingly imprinted onto American politics, culture and conversation. Trumpism can be defined simply through the leader’s “tweeting,” which is then endlessly regurgitated by favorable

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., [“Lockdown Delays Led to at Least 36,000 More Deaths,”](#) *The New York Times*, May 20, 2020 and [“Why Biden’s Polling Lead vs. Trump Isn’t as Strong as it Seems,”](#) by Nate Cohn, *The New York Times*, April 13, 2020.

and unfavorable media alike. In all his communication, Trump uses simple phrases to establish the world of “us vs. them” existing within his Big Lie framework: Make America Great Again; America First; the greatest [everything]; warriors; our people; enemies of the people; swamp; hoax; deep state; traitors; human scum.

Many suppose that Trump hurts himself with his extreme language. The president, however, adopts the practice of *Lingua Trumpi* purposefully. More than the crafted speeches he reads off the teleprompter, his constant use of specific “words, idioms and sentence structures” actually forms the core of Trump’s communication strategy. Through the simple language he uses in public, *Lingua Trumpi* gains legitimacy in the constancy of its use, along with the style of governance and extremist policies it represents. Trump’s message is not only absorbed and adopted by “the base” but also necessarily engaged by critical media and Trump skeptics or opponents. The force of LT, as it was with LTI, is inescapable.

### **The Fall of a Democratic Republic**

Many would reject an analysis that — in less ruthless form — the U.S. has experienced a similar process of accommodation to extremist politics that destroyed the Weimar Republic. The reason, of course, is the clear consequence and incomparable evil that Hitler unleashed on the world. We do not face a Nazi regime, nor a Nazi future. We do, however, face a Trump present and the serious prospect of a Trump future. Historical analogy helps to face both squarely.

In a fully established modern democracy, with greater tradition than the Weimar Republic, an extremist politician with a will to power and having no adherence to the constitutional order, was conferred legitimacy due to success in building a mass base of fanatical support. Bolstered by the accommodation of a party establishment to that politician’s platform and followers, he achieved national power to enact policies of ethnic and religious exclusion and anti-globalist nationalism and militarism. As a large minority did in Germany, a large minority in the U.S. have shown greater loyalty to and tolerance of this extremist doctrine than to America’s democratic traditions. This is the Trump present. This has happened here.

We also do know what a Trump future looks like. The president does tell us what he plans in a second term, Trump will further expel undocumented immigrants on a mass basis; he will permanently end asylum from “shithole countries”; he will deport those who have built a life here as protected refugees; he will continue bans on Muslims traveling to the U.S.; he will complete the border wall (and the symbolic destruction of the Statue of Liberty); he will break the “administrative state” to his will to reduce constraints on his actions; he will abuse his constitutional authority; and he will break permanently with 75 years of bipartisan policy in support of democratic alliances and values. As his political opponent in the upcoming election warns, Trump will indeed “change America forever.” And the world.

The fall of Weimar Germany offers another stark warning: an established democracy was destroyed through provisions in the constitution allowing imposition of minority rule and emergency powers. The parliament was deadlocked in 1932, since a slim or near majority of seats were together held by two extremist parties, the Nazi party and Communist Party (KPD),

the third largest at 14 percent. The KPD rejected cooperation with the still-formidable Social Democratic Party (SPD), the second largest party, while other parties refused cooperation not just with the Nazi Party but with the KPD and the SPD alike. Hitler and the Nazi party thus looked to the anti-democratic mechanisms of the 1919 Constitution to gain and then consolidate power. It is the largest lesson to be learned.

By any clear definition of democracy, provisions in the U.S. constitution have now imposed national minority rule. Trump lost the national popular vote in 2016 by significant margin against his main opponent, 46 percent to 48 percent (or 3 million ballots). He gained the presidency only by eking out a majority in the Electoral College, a determinative mechanism rarely found in other democracies. While U.S. election rules have a clear tradition and were accepted by the candidates, there was no real precedent for such an outcome. The Electoral College corresponded to the national vote in presidential elections continuously for 116 years, from 1880 to 1996 and from 2004 to 2012. When the Electoral College determined the outcome contrary to the popular vote in 2000, both margins were extraordinarily slim.

National minority rule was conceded as legitimate by the opposition political party and even by most citizens opposing Trump — due to tradition, but also out of belief that the 230-year-old U.S. Constitution safeguarded the country’s democratic framework, including its separation of powers. This has proven to be a hide-bound view. The constitutional order has been fractured by an extremist politician’s assumption to power through minority rule and the assertion of anti-democratic means to maintain power.

Donald Trump and his followers neither seek majority support nor accept curbs on his power by majority opposition. He acts to serve only “the base” and plots his re-election with that minority support alone. The Electoral College, a constitutional provision largely intended to prevent a majority from imposing an unfit demagogue as president, is now used by the minority to *impose* such a leader on the country. Further, there is no longer a check on the assertion of minority rule over the majority. Even when Democrats regained control in one legislative chamber, the Republican-controlled Senate, itself serving the interests of a minority, protected Trump’s basis for power, his violations of the constitution, and his expansion of executive power. Trump’s acquittal in his impeachment trial effectively nullified the Constitution’s main protection against the executive’s abuse of power. The citizenry cannot even be assured that an extremist, authoritarian-minded president will abide by majority defeat under the Electoral College.<sup>5</sup>

A greater danger, however, is the permanent acceptance of minority national rule achieved through unfair means.

With the system unchanged for determining the presidency, it is possible that Trump’s opponent could greatly exceed the 2016 national vote margin yet lose the election in an even narrower Electoral College defeat. On top of which, existing rules for U.S. elections allow voter suppression, unrestricted spending by individuals and corporations, and massive propaganda by pro-state broadcast networks and social media accounts (including the president’s own). When

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<sup>5</sup> [“Trump Sows Doubt on Voting. It Keeps Some People Up at Night,”](#) *The New York Times*, May 25, 2020.



observed in other countries, such rules would raise serious questions of the legitimacy of elections.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the Supreme Court, acting on partisan lines, has ruled to allow states to enact greater purges of electoral rolls, stricter voter requirements, and more restricted access to polling stations and mail ballots, all of which impede voter participation in poor, minority and elderly communities. These conditions are worsened both by the pandemic and by the lifting of a long-standing judicial order preventing Republican voter intimidation in minority communities. As in 2016, all these factors could help determine several Electoral College battleground states in Trump's favor.

An added danger is that under these circumstances the U.S. presidential election will again be influenced by foreign intervention. Soon after the 2016 presidential election, it became known that Russia carried out an active measures operation in favor of Donald Trump. We have since learned of the large scale of that operation, which included state-generated propaganda; a wide-ranging social media campaign; the stealing and releasing of emails harmful to Trump's opponent; hacking attempts (some successful) of U.S. state electoral systems and companies supplying voting machines; and influence operations at high and low levels. Despite Trump's ongoing effort to diminish their significance, reports by a Special Counsel and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence affirmed the scale, effectiveness and purposes of the Russian operation to help elect Donald Trump, its correlation with Trump campaign strategy, and the Trump campaign's use of Russia's help.<sup>7</sup>

With its own actions and inaction, the Republican Party accepted such intervention to help win an election and even now defends the solicitation and use of foreign assistance by its candidate. Given that the Russian government did not stop its active measures operation and still favors Donald Trump, we may expect major intervention and Trump's use of it in the 2020 election.

### **Can America Still Be a Democracy?**

We have grown used to explaining our political division by the entrenchment of partisanship on each side. By contrast to Weimar Germany in the early 1930s, however, America currently has no "both sides" extremism. Here, the "other side" is largely attempting to defend the constitutional order. In Germany, the full "other side" of the spectrum to Nazism was the mass-based Communist Party that adhered to strict tenets of Marxism-Leninism acting at the direction of Joseph Stalin. His orders were to facilitate Hitler's rise by using propaganda, violence and other means to weaken the Social Democrats, the main opposition to the Nazi party. In another comparative twist of history, the Russian government is acting again to facilitate right-wing extremism, this time in the United States.

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<sup>6</sup> Nic Cheseman and Brian Klaas, "[How to Steal an Election in Broad Daylight](#)," *Foreign Policy*, May 21, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Neither the Special Counsel nor SSCI investigations tried to ascertain the actual impact of Russia's intervention on the election outcome. Even before their reports were issued, the evidence of a determinative impact had grown. See "The Alarming Story That Won't Go Away," by Eric Chenoweth, *The American Interest* ([August/ September, 2018](#)) and *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President—What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know* by Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Oxford University Press: 2018). A review by Jane Meyer provides a synopsis ("How Russia Helped Swing the Election to Trump," *The New Yorker*, [October 1, 2018](#)).

As with the Weimar Republic on January 30, 1933, America's constitutional order fractured on November 8, 2016. From that point, an anti-majoritarian, anti-democratic, extremist presidency was placed onto a flawed constitutional framework allowing for both minority rule and broad abuse of presidential authority and executive emergency powers.<sup>8</sup>

Accepting the logic of this new presidential system will put a definitive end to American democracy. If Trump is allowed to gain re-election by the same anti-democratic mechanism, under unfair conditions, and with illegal foreign support, it will not be possible to keep the constitutional order intact in a recognizable form. A Republican minority in the Senate could protect such an illegitimate system, while even the slimmest Republican majority would entrench minority rule by establishing full partisan control over the federal judiciary, whose independence would then be lost. The U.S. will become the new example for how an extremist politician can rise to power, destroy a democratic republic, and implement policies of racial and religious exclusion and repression. We may tremble at what a world with such a United States will be like.

The best hope for American democracy is unified action by the majority of citizens to defeat both Donald Trump and the political party that accommodated his rise to power. But even if that defeat is achieved in the upcoming election — against all the obstacles listed — the country must go through a necessary process to confront the fundamental weaknesses in America's constitutional order that brought us to such a state. For that we must recognize the anti-democratic features of the U.S. Constitution, both historically and presently, which serve to protect endemic racism and white minority interests. It was those features specifically that allowed such an extremist politician to gain and abuse power. The lesson of the fall of the Weimar Republic is that even “a state-of-the-art modern democracy” can fail due to its flaws.

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<sup>8</sup> The full nature of those powers is still not widely appreciated and is quite broad. See, e.g., “Break Glass: The Alarming Scope of the President's Emergency Powers,” by Elizabeth Gotein, *The Atlantic*, [January-February 2019](#).