

TEN

IN PLAIN VIEW

The Trump era has generated so many books about the dire risks facing government of, by, and for the people that their titles sound like they are talking to one another, a spoken-word poetry of political breakdown:

How Democracies Die... On Tyranny.
How Democracy Ends... Trumpocalypse.
What Is Populism?... The New Class War.
The Soul of America... Trumpocracy.
Surviving Autocracy... These Truths.

Though the authors of such books often insist that Trump is not their sole preoccupation, the president's glare looms over every volume. "This is not a book about Donald Trump, not by any means," Harvard University's Cass R. Sunstein protests too much in the introduction to his 2018 edited collection *Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America*. Then he adds, "But there is no question that many people, including some of the authors here, think that Trump's words and deeds have put the can-it-happen-here question on the table." It's a bit of a Trumpian conceit—*many people are thinking!*—but let the record reflect that, less than four months later, Sunstein published an essay in the *New York Review of Books* titled "It Can Happen Here." No question mark needed.

Trump may be the muse of the death-of-democracy bookshelf, but it is not a distinction he carries alone. Degraded norms and disenfranchised voters, Chinese ambition and Russian revanchism, unprincipled political parties and unequal administration of justice—these are among the many maladies of democracy in our age. The scholars and analysts writing such books are, so far, better at diagnosing ailments than proposing treatments. It is almost as if, daunted by the scale of the problem, they have downsized their designs, as though our democracy is now so weakened that even mild medicine might prove too taxing.

Such caution is unnecessary and self-defeating. The challenges to democracy that these books outline are integral to this moment but also eternally present, aggravated by Trumpism but inherent in the American experience. The United States at its most heroic—striving to meet its promise of equality and liberty—is also the United States at its least inspiring, as it fails, repeatedly, to get there. "A nation founded on ideals, universal truths, also opens itself to charges of hypocrisy at every turn," the Harvard University historian Jill Lepore writes in *This America* (2019). Hypocrisy and inconsistency are such recurring features of American democracy that they are less its hindrance than its definition.

That's why histories connecting the Trump era to the long arc of America's democratic struggle feel particularly essential now, and they read that way, too. Remembering the history of the nation for all time is critical to writing the history of the nation in our time, which is why Trump seeks to remake not only today but yesterday, too. "Nations, to make sense of themselves, need some kind of agreed-upon past," Lepore explains. "They can get it from scholars or they can get it from demagogues, but get it they will."

• • •

With so many thinkers across so many arenas pointing, retroactively, to the inevitability of a leader like Trump emerging in America—congratulations, you all saw it coming—it is refreshing to find someone who admits he truly had no idea. "I never imagined that democracy *here* could be in danger," writes Larry Diamond in *Ill Winds*. It is a remarkable statement coming from a founding editor of the *Journal of Democracy* and a frequently cited authority on the subject, though it also may simply underscore how the establishment is often the last to realize when its time has come.

To his credit, Diamond saw lots of other stuff coming. Well before Trump's election, the world had plunged into a "democratic recession," he writes, with the rise of illiberal movements in Europe, the autocratic backlash against the Arab Spring, and the avid attempts by Russia and especially China to undermine free societies. "The problem with Russia is managing the anger, insecurity, and resentments of a former superpower; the problem with China is managing the ambitions, swagger, and overreach of a new one," Diamond explains, capturing America's foreign policy dilemma with a pithy contrast. But beyond those two powers, wannabe autocrats across the globe are belittling the free press, rigging elections, politicizing their states' civil service and security apparatus, and undercutting legislative and independent efforts at accountability. It is authoritarianism not by coups or tanks but by the deliberate erosion and co-optation of the rules. Diamond believes that only Washington can offer a counterweight against these trends. "Without U.S. leadership," he warns, "the democratic recession could spiral down into a grim new age of authoritarianism."

Instead, Washington joined the party.

Trump is "the new American Caesar," Diamond decries, a "highly abnormal and dangerous president" contemptuous of the nation's democratic traditions, eager to exert a corrupting influence on law enforcement, dismissive of oversight and preferring to mimic, rather than face down, the rise of authoritarianism. Any efforts to address democracy's decline beyond U.S. shores will have to wait until someone else occupies the Oval Office, he writes. "The longer that Trump stays in power, the deeper and more lasting will be the damage."

The reason Diamond failed to anticipate Trump's threat to democracy at home is that he, like so many, thought America's institutions were strong, its norms of political behavior resilient and embedded. Yes, "norms" have become dutiful shorthand when explaining Trump's transgressions, but they deserve that distinction. By so easily violating multiple standards of presidential behavior—by lying incessantly, even about matters of settled fact; by refusing to release his personal financial information; by disclosing classified intelligence to foreign officials on a whim; by accusing political rivals of unspecified crimes; by dismissing or berating inspectors general and other officials charged with oversight of federal agencies—Trump has shown that those standards are matters of habit and mutual accommodation, not of law or obligation.

In 2018's *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt emphasize four warning signs of incipient authoritarian leaders: they reject the democratic rules of the game, deny the legitimacy of rival politicians, tolerate or encourage political violence, and announce their willingness to limit the civil liberties of opponents, particularly the press. Trump, the authors note, checked all four boxes even before taking office—and he's the type who would. "What kinds of candidates tend to test positive on a litmus test for authoritarianism?" Levitsky and Ziblatt ask. "Very often, populist outsiders do," the leaders who claim to embody the people, standing firm against a corrupt, selfish, and loosely defined elite.

When Trump, in his speech at the 2016 Republican National Convention, declared "I am your voice" and "I alone can fix it," he was both speaking to his base and laying bare his populist credentials. In his brief, illuminating book *What Is Populism?*, published less than two months later, Princeton University political theorist Jan-Werner Müller summarizes the key tenet of populism: "Only some of the people are really the people." Governing with only his core supporters—with some of the people—in mind, rather than the nation in full, Trump has violated the most essential of presidential norms.

Of course, Trump has proved himself a recidivist norm-breaker, uninterested in or uninformed about the rules and traditions of democracy. He doesn't just break a norm once; he comes back and stomps on it to make sure. "In plain view, Trump was flaunting, ignoring, and destroying all institutions of accountability," Masha Gessen writes in *Surviving Autocracy* (2020). "In plain view, he was degrading political speech. In plain view, he was using his office to enrich himself. In plain view, he was courting dictator after dictator. In plain view, he was promoting xenophobic conspiracy theories, now claiming that millions of immigrants voting illegally had cost him the popular vote; now insisting, repeatedly, that Obama had had him wiretapped. All of this, though plainly visible, was unfathomable."

Levitsky and Ziblatt don't detail every Trumpian transgression—it would be hard—but rather highlight the two norms without which every other norm, and democracy itself, begins to unravel. The first is *mutual toleration*, the understanding that political competitors and rival parties should regard one another as legitimate despite their differences over policy or ideology. The second is *forbearance*, the notion that political leaders should exercise restraint in the use of their official powers, that just because it is technically legal to do something doesn't mean you should. These inextricable norms "undergirded American democracy for most of the twentieth century," the authors write.

Trump constantly delegitimizes his opponents, real and perceived, in the political arena, the judiciary, and the press, offering himself as the true and rightful representative of the people. No surprise that, during the president’s Senate impeachment trial, one of his lawyers argued that if Trump believes his reelection is in the public interest, then whatever he does to further that end (such as soliciting Ukrainian assistance in undermining former vice president Joe Biden) cannot be impeachable. No surprise, either, that the president and his defenders frequently invoke the chief executive’s “absolute right” to do just about anything—close the border, interfere with Justice Department investigations, pardon himself, spill intelligence to foreign powers—regardless of whether it’s a good idea, or whether a president should eviscerate standards of behavior just because he can. That is how these norms work together, and fail together. “As mutual toleration disappears, politicians grow tempted to abandon forbearance and try to win at all costs,” Levitsky and Ziblatt write.

Early in the COVID-19 crisis, Trump claimed absolute power over state decisions on loosening health-related restrictions and reopening the economy. “When somebody’s the president of the United States, the authority is total, and that’s the way it’s got to be,” he declared at a press conference. Later, during the 2020 mass protests against racism and police violence, the president pledged that if governors failed to quell the unrest, “I will deploy the United States military and quickly solve the problem for them.” Trump eviscerates any sense of forbearance, claiming all manner of authority, and changing course only when doing so is politically expedient, not when it is institutionally or legally advisable.

Why should Trump care if he jeopardizes the political system? He was elected to dismantle it. In *Surviving Autocracy*, Gessen says that Trump is “probably the first major party nominee who ran not for president but for autocrat,” so brazen were his aspirations to absolute power and indifference to restraint. And while so much has been debated, and so much written, about why certain American voters are attracted to him, the authors of the democracy volumes focus on a different group that could have reconsidered Trump long before his name appeared on a ballot. It is a group whose leaders, initially alarmed by a populist and nativist candidate, opted to collude with him rather than shun or restrain him.

That is the Republican Party.

• • •

“Put simply, political parties are democracy’s gatekeepers,” Levitsky and Ziblatt explain. Throughout the nation’s history, the Democratic and Republican establishments have often succeeded in rooting out or isolating the extremists within, preventing them from reaching power. America’s true protection against would-be autocrats has been as much the discipline of its parties as the wisdom of its voters. But this filtering function has posed a dilemma. “These dual imperatives—choosing a popular candidate and keeping out demagogues—may, at times, conflict with each other,” the authors admit. “What if the people choose a demagogue?”

The Republican Party faced this conundrum in 2016. Rather than fight it, they chose to embrace it. In Trump’s rise, the unpredictable met the deliberate; shock met opportunity. A GOP establishment that comparison-shopped among an uninspiring Jeb Bush, an unappealing Ted Cruz, and an untested Marco Rubio eventually found a bargain-basement deal in Donald Trump.

David Frum has written a pair of books on the Trump years: *Trumpocracy*, published in 2018, and *Trumpocalypse*, out in mid-2020. A longtime conservative author and former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, Frum is particularly fixated on the GOP’s capitulation to Trump. “Gullibly or cynically, resentfully or opportunistically, for lack of better information or for lack of a better alternative, a great party has slowly united to elevate one man into a position of almost absolute power over itself,” he writes in the first volume. If Trump was ever in position to break or bypass norms of politics, decency, and honesty, he got there with “the complicity of his allies among the conservative and Republican political, media, and financial elite.” Other writers have outlined a devil’s bargain between once-fringe nationalist forces and Trump’s populist appeal, but the bargain Frum describes is more straightforward. Uninterested in the policy specifics that animated Republican lawmakers, Trump merely sought their inaction on his conflicts of interest, ethical shortcomings, and corporate entanglements. “*We’ll protect your business if you sign our bills,*” Frum writes. “That was the transaction congressional leaders offered Trump.”

In exchange for backing the president at nearly every turn, Republican Party leaders won tax reform, deregulation, and conservative judicial appointments, and perhaps they’ve decided it’s been a good deal. For all the focus on supposed collusion between Trump and Russia, Levitsky and Ziblatt highlight the “ideological

collusion” between a strongman and his party, “in which the authoritarian’s agenda overlaps sufficiently with that of mainstream politicians,” making him an attractive gamble. But the cost can be steeper than anticipated, and the payment stream unending. “Unwilling to pay the political price of breaking with their own president, Republicans find themselves with little alternative but to constantly redefine what is and isn’t tolerable,” the co-authors write. Once you’ve made an endless string of concessions, it is hard to stop, and you risk becoming that which you thought you were merely accommodating. As Frum puts it in *Trumpocalypse*, “A party dependent on the votes of the alienated and the resentful will find itself articulating a message of alienation and resentment.”

The party decides, we were once told; now, it merely abides.

Of course, it is too much to lay the institutional and political wreckage of the Republican Party solely at Trump’s feet. “Our republic’s sickness has its roots in decades of rising political polarization that has turned our two parties into something akin to warring tribes, willing to skirt bedrock principles of fairness and inclusion for pure partisan advantage,” Diamond writes. But he and other authors recognize that one major party has been more polarizing than the other. The Republican Party has been “the main driver of the chasm between the parties,” Levitsky and Ziblatt point out. For years, it has behaved “like an antisystem party in its obstructionism, partisan hostility, and extremist policy positions.” The dismissiveness of truth and fact, the latent nativism, the opposition for its own sake—all of this was apparent long before Trump propelled his political career with the birther fraud and launched his 2016 campaign with a speech trashing Mexicans and calling the Affordable Care Act a “big lie.” If Trump hijacked the Republican Party, as is often said, he has steered it in a direction it was already pursuing.

Even with another presidential election victory, the GOP would be “wrecked forever,” Frum contends in *Trumpocalypse*. That’s because, to win again in the face of massive health, economic, and social crises, Trump will need to wage culture wars and suppress minority voters, all for a narrow electoral college majority to offset what could be another loss of the popular vote, the third such outcome in twenty years. “What will be the character of such a political party after such a history?” Frum wonders. “Not a democratic political party, that’s for sure. It will have degenerated into a caudillo’s personal entourage.”

The default position of Republican senators during Trump’s impeachment trial—we know he did it, but it’s not really that bad—is a sign of this degeneration. It resurfaced in Attorney General William Barr’s decision to drop the case against former Trump national security adviser Michael Flynn, even though the defendant had pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with Russian officials. And we saw it yet again in resistance against examining the White House’s management of the COVID-19 crisis. In the spring of 2020, Republicans were already cautioning against a post-pandemic “blame game,” while Trump, even though he claimed absolute authority, washed his hands of any accountability. “I don’t take responsibility at all,” he declared in a press conference on March 13. Those words, Frum concludes, “are likely to be history’s epitaph on his presidency.”

And an epitaph for those who nodded in assent.

• • •

The death-of-democracy canon includes plenty of fixes for the GOP and for the American experiment writ large. But they are often small-bore, even admittedly so. Or they are tautological. Or they threaten to adopt, rather than fight, the tactics of democracy’s opponents, simply in the service of an alternative ideological project.

In *Ill Winds*, appearing in mid-2019, Diamond longs for a Republican savior to arise and defy the president’s hold over the party, calling upon some brave party standard-bearer to launch a serious primary challenge to Trump. He name-checks Bob Corker, Jeff Flake, Nikki Haley, Larry Hogan, John Kasich, Mitt Romney, and Ben Sasse, suggesting that, even in defeat, such a candidate would “be rewarded by the verdict of history.” Romney’s courageous and instructive vote to convict Trump in the Senate impeachment trial will make the first paragraph of the Utah senator’s obituary, no doubt, while Hogan’s steady competence as Maryland governor during the coronavirus crisis has offered its own kind of rebuke to Trump—but I don’t think those are the sort of challenges Diamond has in mind. He also encourages more administration insiders to reveal what they have seen of the president behind the scenes, as though a few more installments of the *Chaos Chronicles* will make the difference.

Diamond also calls for simplified voting registration, an end to the electoral college and voter suppression, and the creation of a Public Integrity Protection Agency to uphold anticorruption laws and standards. He urges Americans to elect more senators and representatives who are “ideologically moderate or at least flexible enough to compromise” and, why not, admonishes “people of all ages to be more civil and thoughtful on social media.” His proposals are more a picture of workable democracy than a path to getting there. “What is the culture of democracy?” he asks. “How do we build it and keep it strong? The paramount component is democratic legitimacy—the resilient and broadly shared belief that democracy is better than any other imaginable form of government.” It is an irrefutable argument; if democracy declines, it must be that its legitimacy declined, and if it endures, then clearly its legitimacy did, too.

In *Trumpocalypse*, Frum hopes that a Trump defeat in 2020 could propel a host of political reforms, much as the sins of Watergate led to self-examination and new oversight. But several of his proposals, while important and necessary, feel partial. They include ensuring that presidential candidates make their tax returns and financial assets public, killing the Senate filibuster, and passing a new federal voting rights law that addresses “the abuses of the present, not the memories of the past.” What Frum desires above all is a process of post-Trump reconciliation, and of all his proposals, that one might be hardest to achieve. The president deserves the full penalty of the law, and his enablers in politics and the press deserve contempt, but his voters are “our compatriots,” Frum emphasizes, and Democrats won’t defeat or move beyond Trump unless they can build an America with “room for all its people.” So be nice to the president’s supporters, Frum urges. “The resentments that produced Trump will not be assuaged by contempt for the resentful,” he writes. This advice echoes that of the authors of *Rules of Resistance*, except in this case it comes from a writer whose very book title suggests a dire, apocalyptic view of what Trump voters have brought upon the country.

Anti-Trump conservatives love to offer campaign strategy and political advice to Democrats, an enemy-of-my-enemy magnanimity that is rarely welcome on the left. Frum urges progressives to moderate their tones and policies, to stop being *so woke*—he loves saying “woke”—and to quit offending people by calling out their racism. “Trump is president not only because many of your fellow citizens are racists, or sexists, or bigots of some other description, although surely some are,” he argues. “Trump is president also because many of your fellow citizens feel that accusations of bigotry are deployed casually and carelessly.” After so much mockery of the supposed sensitivities of the Left, it turns out that the feelings of Trump supporters are no less fragile. “Even if plague and recession topple Trump from the presidency,” Frum writes, “the core Trump base will remain, alienated and resentful.”

Rather than follow such advice, some activists and thinkers on the left are inclined to examine how the Right has undermined democracy—and then retrofit those tactics for their own benefit. In *The Democracy Fix* (2019), Caroline Fredrickson offers a plan for the defense and renewal of democracy at home, but one that primarily serves progressive visions of government. She draws inspiration from the “Powell Memo,” a 1971 document drawn up by tobacco industry lawyer and future Supreme Court justice Lewis Powell that became, as she describes it, “the road map for conservative dominance of public policymaking.”

Fredrickson, a former president of the American Constitution Society, is an ex-general counsel of NARAL, a onetime special assistant to President Bill Clinton, and an unabashed progressive, and she looks upon the American Right with a mix of contempt, jealousy, and grudging admiration. Powell’s memo, written for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, proposed a sustained response to growing environmental regulations and consumer protection initiatives that threatened corporate power. *The Democracy Fix* is, in large part, the story of how that memo inspired the creation of corporate philanthropies, conservative think tanks, a right-wing media machine to counter and discredit the mainstream press, and a pipeline of conservative jurists to fill federal and state courts. “What Powell grasped,” Fredrickson writes, “is that policy victories come *after* gaining control of the levers of power—and not before.”

She is persuasive in making connections that span decades, explaining how right-wing think tanks drive pro-corporate political narratives and groom personnel to enter key government policy roles; how legal activists work diligently to discourage corporate litigation and to influence the appointment of friendly judges at all levels, including the Supreme Court; and how political operatives and funders focus on key legislative races that will help the Republican Party control the redistricting process and thus entrench legislative power. Whether the Powell Memo truly unleashed all this (some writers suggest that its historical influence has been exaggerated) becomes less relevant as the chapters progress. What does matter, Fredrickson emphasizes, is that the Right had a long-term plan, and the Left didn’t.

However, it often seems that Fredrickson is more interested in boosting progressivism than in strengthening democracy, or that she blithely assumes the two goals necessarily go together. She wants “good judges,” she writes, a formulation that later morphs into “good, progressive judges.” It is not enough to declare originalism suspect as an interpretation of the Constitution; the case must be made that the document is inherently progressive. Much as some of the resistance writers expressed admiration for the Tea Party’s tactics and organizing abilities, by the end of her book Fredrickson is hailing Powell as a “visionary” to be emulated, rather than explaining his memo as a cautionary tale of how political activists can hijack a democratic system. “We’ve been screwed for too long,” she laments. “It’s time to grab the pen and write our own rules.” So she appends a public memo of her own, addressed to “Progressive Americans” and calling for a well-funded infrastructure on the left, reformed voting laws, and, of course, more of those good judges. Fredrickson may be correct in her political analysis, but *The Democracy Fix* seems like more of a fix for American progressivism.

For writers such as Michael Lind, the problem with the Democrats is not that they have failed to twist the rules in their favor but that they have succeeded, only in the service of a new “managerial elite” of business, government, and media oligarchs. The Democratic Party “is now a party of the affluent native white metropolitan elite, allied with immigrants and native minorities brought together by noneconomic identity politics rather than by class politics,” he writes in *The New Class War* (2020). The “technocratic neoliberalism” of the Left is failing American democracy, because it no longer channels and supports the institutions—such as labor unions, mass-membership parties, and religious and civic organizations—that once gave voice to working-class people. Instead, Lind writes, managerial elites are a self-serving class that enjoys “near monopolies of expertise, wealth, and cultural influence,” and that refuses to acknowledge the persistence of class disparities. It offers only “palliative reform” such as education and redistribution, without questioning liberalized policies on trade, immigration, and labor rights. Trump-style populism is the natural if regrettable reaction to this abdication by the Left.

Lind proposes a new “democratic pluralism,” a power-sharing arrangement in which labor and capital can reach accommodations, with government a broker between them. He is hazy on the specifics of how to make it happen, and his depictions of the oligarchical Left sometimes veer into caricature. But *The New Class War* is a helpful corrective to the simpleminded belief that the Left merely need copy and redirect the antidemocratic strategies of the Right. The outcome of such a standoff is grim, Lind concludes, “a future of gated communities and mobs led by demagogues at their gates.”

• • •

The horror or disdain with which many citizens regard the Trump presidency is premised, in part, on the notion that its problems are unprecedented and its moral shortcomings antithetical to longstanding American values. Critics of Trump’s immigration policy, as we’ve seen, have been particularly susceptible to such reactions. This is why “normalizing” President Trump has become our era’s mortal sin, and “that’s not who we are” a battle cry for those who see today’s antidemocratic and nativist impulses as aberrations along that long arc toward justice.

But what if this *is* normal for America? What if it *is* who we are or, at least, who we have too often been? Jon Meacham’s *The Soul of America*, published in 2018, finds that national soul in the enduring attempts to expand liberty and opportunity. “It is a belief in the proposition, as Jefferson put it in the Declaration, that all men are created equal,” Meacham writes. “It is therefore incumbent on us, from generation to generation, to create a sphere in which we can live, live freely, and pursue happiness to the best of our abilities.” But at the same time he points to that “universal American inconsistency”—even as we uphold life and liberty for some, we restrict them from others, those deemed undeserving, untrustworthy, unequal.

Slavery. The Klan. Jim Crow. The Klan again. The internment of Japanese Americans and the expulsion of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Gender discrimination and scientific racism. The Southern Strategy. Mass incarceration. All this leads to a president whom Meacham considers “an heir to the white populist tradition,” a president whose only abnormality is that he manages to embody so many recurring maladies of American public life.

It is impossible to read Meacham’s descriptions of politicians such as Senator Joseph McCarthy and Governor George Wallace without feeling the shadow of Trump. In his call for segregation now, tomorrow, and forever, Wallace “brought something intriguing to the modern politics of fear in America: a visceral connection to his crowds, an appeal that confounded elites but which gave him a durable base,” Meacham writes. And in

Copyright © 2020. Simon & Schuster. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

stoking the Red Scare, McCarthy was “a master of false charges, of conspiracy-tinged rhetoric, and of calculated disrespect for conventional figures... McCarthy could distract the public, play the press, and change the subject—all while keeping himself at center stage.” Meacham quotes McCarthy’s comments to his young chief counsel, Roy Cohn, before the televised congressional hearings in 1954 investigating a conflict between the Wisconsin senator and the U.S. Army: “People aren’t going to remember the things we say on the issues here, our logic, our common sense, our facts. They’re only going to remember the impressions.” Cohn would later become Trump’s lawyer, and McCarthy’s logic—privileging emotions over facts, employing media technologies not to illuminate but to obscure—would become part of the Trump ethos.

Meacham means to hearten his readers. Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt are recurring characters in *The Soul of America*, because “the most consequential of our past presidents have unified and inspired with conscious dignity and conscientious efficiency.” These qualities do not spring to mind when considering our forty-fifth commander in chief, and Meacham likes to remind us of better times. “The good news is that we have come through such darkness before,” the historian assures, and we’ve made it to the other side. “All has seemed lost before, only to give way, after decades of gloom, to light.”

Of course, if you happen to inhabit those decades of gloom, awareness of historical patterns bestows only limited consolation. Yet Meacham stresses how those who have fought to expand American democracy have done so by emphasizing its shortcomings but also by envisioning its possibilities, and by insisting that America live up to its stated aspirations. He recalls the words of Martin Luther King Jr. addressing a mass meeting on the Montgomery bus boycott: “We are here this evening—for serious business,” King said. “We are here in a general sense, because first and foremost—we are American citizens—and we are determined to apply our citizenship—to the fullness of its meaning.”

Meacham concludes *The Soul of America* with a rousing affirmation that, “for all of our darker impulses, for all of our shortcomings, and for all of the dreams denied and deferred, the experiment begun so long ago, carried out so imperfectly, is worth the fight.” Reading him and others, I would offer but one amendment: the American experiment is not just *worth* the fight, it is synonymous with it. That is the fullness of its meaning. With passions always strained, the bonds of affection always near the breaking point, the pursuit of freedom and prosperity and belonging is an endless American struggle, an enterprise in equal measures exhausting, exasperating, and exhilarating.

That is the message infusing *These Truths*, by Jill Lepore, a hefty single-volume history of the United States published in 2018, as well as the following year’s *This America*, a slim summary of, addendum to, and justification for the earlier work. For Lepore, the fundamental question of America is whether it has lived up to those self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence: political equality (“all men are created equal”), natural rights (which are “unalienable”), and government through popular sovereignty (that is, “the consent of the governed”). The Declaration was “an act of extraordinary political courage,” Lepore writes in *These Truths*, yet its failures were also self-evident from the start. Even as it affirmed human dignity and political equality, it ignored enslaved Africans and their descendants—an omission Lepore decries as a “colossal failure of political will.”

That failure would give us the Civil War, “a revolutionary war of emancipation,” as Lepore puts it, whose aftermath would pose fundamental questions about citizenship, suffrage, and race. The reckoning would be postponed with *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court’s 1896 decision that narrowing, contradicting, or simply ignoring the meaning of the Declaration and the Fourteenth Amendment, gave the federal imprimatur to Jim Crow. “In one of the most wrenching tragedies in American history—a chronicle not lacking for tragedy—the Confederacy had lost the war, but it had won the peace,” Lepore asserts.

In this light, asking whether authoritarianism can take root in America feels vaguely absurd. “Discussions about whether ‘it could happen’ in the United States sometimes overlook that it did happen in the United States,” law professor David A. Strauss writes in his contribution to Sunstein’s *Can It Happen Here?* “From roughly the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, parts of the United States were ruled by an undemocratic, illiberal, racist regime” under which African Americans were denied the vote and violently suppressed.

To Lepore, the truths of the Declaration are real but also eternally aspirational, “fought for, by sword and, still more fiercely, by pen.” They are always with us, shaming and inspiring at once. “A nation born in

Copyright © 2020. Simon & Schuster. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

revolution will forever struggle against chaos,” she writes. “A nation founded on universal rights will wrestle against the forces of particularism... And a nation born in contradiction, liberty in a land of slavery, sovereignty in a land of conquest, will fight, forever, over the meaning of its history.”

Americans, Lepore concludes in *This America*, are bound together not only by the power of our common ideals but by “the force of our disagreements.”

• • •

In a democracy, there are disagreements, and then there are efforts to inhibit those who might disagree from even expressing themselves. This is revealed, starkly, in Carol Anderson’s *One Person, No Vote* (2018), a history of voter suppression tactics spanning the American timeline. Anderson, a professor of history at Emory University, details the devastating effectiveness of poll taxes, literacy tests, voter registration rules, and other restrictions on voting that have targeted black Americans and other minority groups, all under the guise of racially neutral concerns such as fiscal responsibility, administrative efficiency or, most popular, the prevention of voter fraud. Such devices are “variations on a theme going back more than 150 years,” Anderson writes, always cloaked in “feigned legal innocence.”

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was critical to protecting the enfranchisement of African Americans because it mandated federal intervention to uphold the franchise, “not because the racism that required the law in the first place had stopped,” Anderson points out. In fact, it confronted a racism in which both major parties had long been complicit. As Levitsky and Ziblatt write in *How Democracies Die*, the “context of exclusion” underpinning America’s democratic norms had helped white Democrats and Republicans coexist without coming to regard each other as existential threats. The effort to truly democratize the country with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act the following year would upend that balance, they explain, “posing the greatest challenge to established forms of mutual toleration and forbearance since Reconstruction.”

That challenge came alive with *Shelby County v. Holder*, the 2013 Supreme Court case that overturned the Voting Rights Act mandate that any changes to election laws in states with a history of discrimination had to be cleared by the federal government. The consequences of holding national elections without such federal protections soon became clear. “The rash of voter ID laws, purged voting rolls, redrawn district boundaries, and closed and moved polling places were the quiet and barely detected fire that burned through the 2016 presidential election, evaporating millions of votes,” Anderson writes. In a close contest, such tactics can make a critical difference, as much as or more than any foreign interference.

The prospect that a more minority-heavy American electorate could prove politically advantageous to Democrats had caused consternation among Republicans after the 2012 election, so much so that the Republican National Committee wrote the so-called autopsy report—officially known as the Growth and Opportunity Project—which proposed renewed outreach to Hispanic, Asian, and African American voters.

Or, rather than letting demography become destiny, you could just keep it from voting.

That is the story Stacey Abrams tells in *Our Time Is Now* (2020), a work that extends Anderson’s history into the present, where it remains fully alive. Abrams, an African American voting-rights activist and former Georgia state legislator, lost a close gubernatorial race in 2018 to a Republican candidate who, as secretary of state, was also in charge of overseeing the electoral process. Abrams refused to offer a conventional concession speech; instead, in remarks she delivered more than a week after the election, Abrams only acknowledged that she had no remaining legal remedy against a process she believed had been tainted with widespread voter suppression. “The system worked as manipulated,” she writes.

Abrams looks back on constitutional amendments ending slavery and expanding suffrage, landmark court decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, and legislation such as the Voting Rights Act, but recognizes each as a step, not an end. “We often see these historical moments as flash points with instant gratification; however, with most movements, the new laws, the new rules, only herald possibility. More must be done to make it so.” For Abrams, that “more” involves her battle for expanded voting rights, and her book mixes her experiences as a lawmaker, candidate, and activist. Voting is “a leap of faith,” she writes, but the faith is always tested. “Modern-day suppression has swapped rabid dogs and cops with billy clubs for restrictive voter ID and tangled rules for participation,” she writes. Partisans who imagine that America’s ongoing demographic transformation into a majority-minority country will eventually deliver a new progressive coalition are too optimistic, she concludes. “Demography is not destiny,” Abrams writes. “It is opportunity.”

Copyright © 2020. Simon & Schuster. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair use permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

The authors in the death-of-democracy genre often warn that a major catastrophe—a war, an insurgency, an act of terrorism—can spur attacks against the rule of law. “Would-be autocrats often use economic crises, natural disasters, and especially security threats... to justify antidemocratic measures,” Levitsky and Ziblatt write. Citizens, suddenly fearing for their safety, are more tolerant of authoritarian encroachments. In *Ill Winds*, Diamond sounds the same caution but in more specific terms: “Just imagine what Trump might propose in the wake of a mass-casualty jihadist attack on U.S. soil.”

Under Trump, America has suffered mass shootings, witnessed an emboldened white-nationalist movement, waged a trade war with China, traded nuclear threats with North Korea, belittled democratic allies, and sucked up to authoritarian leaders. And that was all before the COVID-19 pandemic reached our shores, our airports, our nursing homes, our workplaces, our communities, our lives.

It was not an insurgency, terrorist strike, or war, but it is nonetheless the greatest crisis of the post-9/11 era. By June 2020, its national death toll had more than doubled that of U.S. forces in the Vietnam War, and its job losses soon elicited Depression-era comparisons. The onset of the coronavirus pandemic was, by any definition, a mass-casualty event, and its economic, health, social, and cultural effects will endure for years to come. But the crisis only seemed to deepen Trump’s defiance of, and disregard for, political and democratic norms. It underscored his particularism, with the president seeking to assist governors depending on their fealty to him. It heightened his disdain for accountability; “I am the oversight,” the president declared, dismissing legislative efforts to oversee the disbursement of stimulus funds. It allowed his administration to push through new restrictions, particularly on immigration, that it had long sought. It created new opportunities for voter suppression, with Trump immediately resisting moves to facilitate voting by mail. And it allowed Trump to temporarily replace his rallies with a stream of press conferences in which he misled the public on testing, treatments, and his administration’s efforts to fight the virus—all while bragging about his television ratings and denouncing his critics.

It was performance masquerading as governance. As Gessen puts it in *Surviving Autocracy*, the pandemic enabled Trump to “govern in precisely the manner to which he aspired... with the eyes of the nation riveted to him.”

The intersecting crises of 2020—the coronavirus, mass unemployment, social upheaval—managed to stay true to the inequalities of the American story. The pandemic afflicted African Americans, Hispanics, and low-income and elderly citizens worse than others, and it made clear the disparities in health care access, job security, and wealth that still beset us. And nearly 250 years after we declared political equality a self-evident right, inequality before the law persists. In this context, restoring and protecting democratic norms is only the beginning of the task before us. “Those norms must be made to work in an age of racial equality and unprecedented ethnic diversity,” Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize. “Few societies in history have managed to be both multiracial and genuinely democratic. That is our challenge.”

It is a challenge we’ve always faced yet never fully met. “The United States, rebuked by all those left out of its vision of the nation, began battling that contradiction early on, and has never stopped,” Lepore writes in *This America*. “In the United States, the nation *is* that battle.”

The Trump era and its aftermath, then, present but the latest fight. The only difference is that, this time, it’s our fight, with many more books to come judging how well we wage it, and how well we understand it.

BOOKS DISCUSSED

- Stacey Abrams. *Our Time Is Now: Power, Purpose, and the Fight for a Fair America*. Henry Holt, 2020.
- Carol Anderson. *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression Is Destroying Our Democracy*. Bloomsbury, 2018.
- Larry Diamond. *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency*. Penguin Press, 2019.
- Carol Fredrickson. *The Democracy Fix: How to Win the Fight for Fair Rules, Fair Courts, and Fair Elections*. The New Press, 2019.
- David Frum. *Trumpocalypse: Restoring American Democracy*. Harper, 2020.
- . *Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic*. Harper, 2018.
- Masha Gessen. *Surviving Autocracy*. Riverhead Books, 2020.
- Jill Lepore. *These Truths: A History of the United States*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.
- . *This America: The Case for the Nation*. Liveright, 2019.
- Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. Crown, 2018.
- Michael Lind. *The New Class War: Saving Democracy from the Managerial Elite*. Portfolio/Penguin, 2020.
- Jon Meacham. *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. Random House, 2018.
- Jan-Werner Müller. *What Is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Cass R. Sunstein, ed. *Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America*. Dey St., 2018.

EPILOGUE

TWELVE BOOKS

“Over the past four years, I have thought and spoken and written about Donald Trump almost more than I can bear,” David Frum confesses in *Trumpocalypse*. “You probably feel the same fatigue.”

David, you have no idea.

I did not expect, when I became a book critic at the *Washington Post* in 2015, that I would spend so much mental energy on Donald Trump, much less that something called “the Trump era” would be immediately recognizable shorthand for a nation suffused with conflict, crudeness, and mistrust. But with that fatigue also came a growing hunger for insight and comprehension. For me, books have been a way to satisfy it.

“What should I read to understand what’s going on?” I’ve gotten this question a lot during the Trump presidency. A useful answer seems impossible, so dependent is it on each reader’s needs, interests, curiosities, and blind spots. Instead, the best I can do is highlight the books that have upended my own assumptions and shifted my vantage points. I don’t mean to proclaim these the *best* books of the Trump era, the most beautifully written or deeply reported, though some may indeed merit such praise. Only that these are the works that have best helped me make sense of this time, the ones I suspect I’ll revisit long after the Trump era has become a subject for works of history.

We’re Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America, by Jennifer Silva

Memoirs such as J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* and Sarah Smarsh’s *Heartland* provide memorable testimonials of working-class life, while studies such as *Alienated America* by Timothy Carney and *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* by Anne Case and Angus Deaton bring a crucial cultural and economic lens to the subject. In *We’re Still Here*, Silva manages to do both. This book expands my notions of who belongs to the heartland, and of the obstacles to belonging in our national politics.

On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons for the Twentieth Century, by Timothy Snyder

It’s one of the earliest and slimmest of the resistance volumes, yet still the one I turn to most often. Snyder’s historical context and stark warnings (“think up your own way of speaking”; “do not obey in advance”) feel more powerful for having come so early. Published barely a month into the new administration, it could only picture what was to come, so it draws on the author’s scholarship to warn of post-truth, heedless conformity, and institutional abdication. The effect is timeliness and timelessness at once.

A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream, by Yuval Levin

This is an almost countercultural book—a call for personal and institutional restraint in public life, for a politics that forms us rather than performs for us. Levin writes from a conservative perspective, but his admonition applies broadly: “Given my role here, how should I act?” It is a question too easily forgotten, and a burden too easily shed.

America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States, by Erika Lee

This is a hard book to read but a necessary one, especially for anyone who looks upon our ongoing battles over immigration and concludes, with such confidence, that “we are better than this.” We may strive to be better than this, but Lee’s methodical and merciless history of American prejudice against outsiders shows how often we