

FIVE

TRUE ENOUGH

Back in the summer of 2002, long before “fake news” or “alternative facts” had infected the political vernacular, one of President George W. Bush’s senior advisers mocked a journalist for forming part of the “reality-based community.” Reality was for suckers, the aide explained. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.” This was the hubris of a post–Cold War, pre–Iraq War superpower: if you exert enough pressure, events will bend to your will.

Reality-based thinking is again under attack from the White House, but the torrent of deceit that has emanated from the Trump presidency over the past four years is lazier, more cynical. It does not flow from strength but from shamelessness. It does not appear to serve any grand political strategy or ideology; it is self-serving. Its only endgame is to keep the game going.

Bush hoped to remake the world. Trump just makes it up as he goes along.

Among the battlegrounds of the Trump era, the cheapening of truth has drawn some of the most impassioned responses. Philosophers, literary critics, social scientists, cultural historians, political strategists, legal analysts, and of course journalists have published studies, polemics, and testimonials on truth in our time. Their book titles veer toward the terrifying—*The Death of Truth*, *Post-Truth*, *The Enemy of the People*, *Lying in State*, and *Gaslighting America*, among others—but their efforts to identify the prime mover behind today’s political untruth can feel a bit esoteric. Is it postmodernism? Technology? The perversion of Enlightenment values, or the Enlightenment itself? Is lying just Trump’s way—or just the American way?

These works succeed in finding patterns in, and methods to, the onslaught of the president’s falsehoods (more than 20,000 false or misleading statements by July 2020, according to *Washington Post* fact-checkers), but even some of the most pessimistic authors have struggled to anticipate the extent of Trump’s manipulations or interpret their impact. The power of his lies is not merely in their tally but in the escalating demands they make on us. First, we are asked to believe specific lies. Then, to bend the truth to our preferred politics. Next, to accept only what the president certifies as true, no matter the subject or how often his positions shift. After that, to hold that there is really no knowable, agreed-upon truth. Finally, to conclude that even if there is a truth, it is inconsequential. Lies don’t matter; only the man uttering them does.

Defending Trump’s lies is no longer about conviction, if it ever was. It is about allegiance. In his 1987 memoir, *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, the forty-one-year-old real estate developer happily admitted that he prizes loyalty over integrity, a point he reiterated thirty years later in the White House, with his request to then-FBI director James B. Comey: “I need loyalty. I expect loyalty.” Accepting, excusing, or justifying Trump’s falsehoods now functions as a test of that loyalty—a sign that you are a member in good standing of the team. The president’s supporters know full well that he lies. Ted Cruz publicly called Trump a “pathological liar” during the 2016 primary campaign, before the Texas senator joined the loyalty brigade, while John Dowd, one of Trump’s attorneys during the special counsel investigation into Russian election interference, described his client as a “fucking liar” in an interview with journalist Bob Woodward.

This knowledge does not seem to matter much. “Liars want their lies to be believed as if they were the truth, but it is not clear that Trump cares whether his falsehoods are believed; he seems to care only that they are affirmed,” political scientists Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum write in *A Lot of People Are Saying* (2019). “He wants the power to make others assent to his version of reality.”

Trump would love to exert power over the truth itself. He has settled for power over us.

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The first fight about the decline of truth in the Trump era was over who started it.

In *The Death of Truth* (2018), literary critic Michiko Kakutani attacks Trump with a fusillade of bookish references and cultural allusions. “If a novelist had concocted a villain like Trump,” she writes, “a larger-than-life, over-the-top avatar of narcissism, mendacity, ignorance, prejudice, boorishness, demagoguery, and tyrannical impulses... she or he would likely be accused of extreme contrivance and implausibility.” (Reminder: To make it into the anti-Trump canon, a hefty dose of personal attacks is required early on—just to make clear whose side you’re on.) Kakutani regards America’s president as “some manic cartoon artist’s mashup of Ubu Roi, Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, and a character discarded by Molière.”

In its randomness and meaninglessness and indifference to consequences, Kakutani writes, America under Trump also resembles *The Great Gatsby*, *Fight Club*, *No Country for Old Men*, and even *True Detective*. To interpret this era’s debasement of language, Kakutani enlists the World War II–era diaries of Victor Klemperer, while cameos by Christopher Lasch, Tom Wolfe, and Columbia Law School professor Tim Wu explain the rise of narcissistic fantasies, hedonistic vanity, and the “preening self” of the social-media age. *The Death of Truth* is a slim book but a crowded one.

You don’t have to get every reference—believe me, I did not—to realize that it’s all meant to be quite terrible and damning for Trump. And it is. But even though Kakutani asserts that Trump’s presidency embodies “some sort of climax in the warping of reality,” she does not blame him for it, or at least not him alone. Kakutani calls out lefty academics who for decades preached postmodernism, who argued that truth is not universal but malleable, a reflection of economic, political, and cultural forces as well as differences in relative power and individual positioning. In these early culture wars, centered on literary studies, postmodernists rejected Enlightenment ideals as “vestiges of old patriarchal and imperialist thinking,” which opened the way to today’s violence against scientific facts and political argument. “It’s safe to say that Trump has never plowed through the works of Derrida, Baudrillard, or Lyotard (if he’s even heard of them),” Kakutani sniffs, yet she concedes that “dumbed-down corollaries” of postmodernist thinking have been hijacked by Trump’s defenders, who use them to explain away his untruths, inconsistencies, and broken promises.

The complicity of postmodernism is a recurring theme in the Trump truth literature, particularly among its more academic entries. In his 2018 book *On Truth*, philosopher Simon Blackburn chastised postmodernism’s “ironical stance” toward science and worries that American politics has entered a “post-shame” environment: when the consequences of lying diminish, the frequency of lying will increase. In *Post-Truth*, also published in 2018, philosopher Lee McIntyre convincingly shows how intelligent-design proponents and later climate-change skeptics drew from postmodernism to distort public perceptions of evolution and global warming. “It’s all fun and games to attack truth in the academy,” he writes, “but what happens when one’s tactics leak out into the hands of science deniers and conspiracy theorists, or thin-skinned politicians who insist that their instincts are better than any evidence?” McIntyre notes how pro-Trump troll Mike Cernovich, who helped popularize the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, has cited such influences. “Look, I read postmodernist theory in college,” Cernovich told *The New Yorker* in 2016. “If everything is a narrative, then we need alternatives to the dominant narrative.” And it is a short leap from alternative narratives to alternative facts. Postmodernism, McIntyre concludes, is “the godfather of post-truth.”

While the philosophy profs and book critics target 1960s postmodernist theories, other writers argue that today’s post-truth moment has a much longer lineage. RAND Corporation researchers Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich point to the yellow-journalism era of the late nineteenth century and the rise of radio, television, and tabloids in the twentieth century as other moments that blurred the lines between facts, data, opinion, and experience. These past episodes, Kavanagh and Rich write in their 2018 book *Truth Decay*, were eventually undercut by “a revival of fact-based policy analysis or journalism and a renewed interest in holding authorities more accountable.” Such a course correction is harder, however, when the journalists and government officials promoting accountability are themselves tarred as fundamental threats to truth.

For author and former *Studio 360* host Kurt Andersen, the problem is both deeper and simpler. Post-truth, Andersen writes in *Fantasyland* (2017), is congenital to a nation born in both Enlightenment ideals and religious extremism, a defect aggravated by the do-your-own-thing 1960s and the digital age. “Being American means we can believe any damn thing we want, that our beliefs are equal or superior to anyone else’s, experts be damned,” Andersen maintains. “People tend to regard the Trump moment—this post-truth, alternative facts moment—as some inexplicable and crazy *new* American phenomenon. In fact, what’s happening is just the ultimate extrapolation and expression of attitudes and instincts that have made America exceptional for its entire history.”

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While writers like Kakutani worry that Enlightenment values of rationalism and empiricism have eroded under Trump, Andersen sees the Enlightenment itself as part of the problem, freeing people to “believe *anything whatsoever* about every aspect of existence,” however fake or crazy or impossible. The misplaced trust in a marketplace of ideas where reason would always win out allowed peddlers of fantasy—from Cotton Mather to P. T. Barnum to Oprah Winfrey to one Donald J. Trump—to gain influence. After all, Andersen emphasizes, markets are not always efficient purveyors of optimal outcomes. Sometimes they crash.

Andersen is a smooth writer, and he offers memorable signposts of the decline of truth, noting, for instance, how once pejorative words connoting unreality such as “incredible,” “unbelievable,” “unreal,” “fabulous,” and “fantastic” became, over the course of the twentieth century, terms of the highest praise. Still, *Fantasyland* reads a bit like the work of an author who comes up with a catchy idea and then dumpster-dives his way through the American timeline for whatever might support it. The Salem witch trials, the Gold Rush, Scientology, Civil War reenactors, the tech bubble—all are evidence of Andersen’s title conceit, and some variant on the word “fantasy” appears on virtually every page, just in case we might forget. His story concludes, inexorably, with the current president. “Donald Trump is a pure Fantasyland being, its apotheosis,” Andersen writes, his personal unreality “a patchwork of knowing falsehoods and sincerely believed fantasies.”

The mix of entertainment, news, and opinion in the public square is less a marketplace of ideas than an illusion of being informed, a “shortcut to erudition” rather than the real thing. So writes Tom Nichols in *The Death of Expertise*, published just a couple of months into the Trump presidency. “What I find so striking today is not that people dismiss expertise, but that they do so with such frequency, on so many issues, and with such *anger*,” Nichols notes. And the intellectuals and writers who normally serve as idea brokers among academics, government officials, and the public are growing just as frustrated and polarized as everyone else. “When we are incapable of sustaining a chain of reasoning past a few mouse clicks,” Nichols writes, “we cannot tolerate even the smallest challenge to our beliefs or ideas.”

So the distortion of truth in our time derives from postmodernism, or the perversion of Enlightenment ideals, or rationalism itself, or the internet, or some combination of all of the above. Trump himself is a bit player in all this, just one more truth truther in the bunch. Still, he deserves credit for keeping a firm grasp on the nation’s unhinging, for understanding when we would be ready for him. “Trump waited to run for president until he sensed that a critical mass of Americans had decided politics were *all* a show and a sham,” Andersen explains in *Fantasyland*.

In that world, Trump fits right in.

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Trump’s untruths are so relentless and scattershot, one moment dealing with North Korea’s nuclear threat, another with the cancer risks posed by windmills, and the next with the healing properties of disinfectant, that it’s hard to discern any pattern. In *Gaslighting America* (2018), conservative political commentator Amanda Carpenter deftly identifies a logic—not to the lies themselves, but to how Trump unspools them.

A Trump lie, she explains, typically features five steps. First, “stake a claim,” meaning own a political issue that others prefer not to touch. Second, “advance and deny”—that is, put the lie out there without claiming responsibility for it. (This is Trump’s *someone should look into it* phase.) Third, “create suspense” by promising evidence that never materializes. Fourth, “discredit the opponent” by attacking the character and motives of anyone challenging the lie, thus rendering the matter controversial even when the truth is anything but. And fifth, claim a win, no matter what. Remarkably, Trump pulls off this last step even when admitting a lie: when he finally acknowledged that President Obama was indeed born in the United States, for instance, Trump accused Hillary Clinton of launching birtherism and congratulated himself for putting the matter to rest. Trump knows he can’t compete in everyone else’s reality, Carpenter contends, so he just creates his own.

That reality often takes the form of conspiracy theories. “No president—indeed, no national official—has resorted to accusations of conspiracy so instinctively, so frequently, and with such brio as Donald Trump,” write Muirhead and Rosenblum. Millions of people voted illegally in California, Trump claims, otherwise he would have won the popular vote in 2016. President Obama wiretapped Trump Tower. The hacked Democratic National Committee server was in Ukraine, where the real election interference originated. Democrats and the press pushed a coronavirus “hoax” to undercut his reelection chances; once the virus became too real and too fatal to dismiss, it morphed into a cunning foreign plot.

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Muirhead and Rosenblum argue that there is something unique about Trumpian conspiracies. They dispense with the usual intricate explanations and strained evidence that paint a damning picture of secret, dastardly acts. With Trump, “there is no punctilious demand for proofs, no exhausting amassing of evidence, no dots revealed to form a pattern, no close examination of the operators plotting in the shadows.” With Trump, there is conspiracy, but no theory. This is what Muirhead and Rosenblum call “the new conspiracism,” one based on nothing but innuendo and repetition, all allegation and no evidence. The new conspiracism “substitutes social validation for scientific validation: if *a lot of people are saying* it, to use Trump’s signature phrase, then it is true enough.” Unless a belief can be irrefutably falsified, then “it might be true,” the authors explain, and these days that’s plenty. Of all the norms of public life that Trump has shattered, this one may be the most ironic: he has lowered the bar even for conspiracy theories.

Yet that renders them more potent, not less. Trumpian conspiracies rely on simple, even one-word assertions—an election is “rigged,” an investigation is a “hoax,” a news story is “fake”—that build more power the more they are shared and repeated. Conventional conspiracies must persuade through their complexity and contrivances, but Trump’s carry no such burden. Normal conspiracies, however deluded, also often uphold some principle or idealistic goal, such as unmasking a nefarious political actor or revealing stealthy threats to personal liberty. Trump-style conspiracies are wholly negative, Muirhead and Rosenblum contend, focused solely on “destabilizing, degrading, deconstructing, and finally delegitimizing, without a countervailing constructive impulse.” Their targets are political opponents and any independent arbiter of truth. Trump’s conspiracies don’t just undermine particular facts but seek to tear down the way truths are reached and agreed upon.

Muirhead and Rosenblum offer an example of this corrosion:

We see how the longer-term process of delegitimation goes: a conspiracist president tilts against his own government—against the Justice Department, the State Department, and potentially every agency he directs. Offended by the “deep state” that he imagines plots against him, the president first ignores and then eliminates the career bureaucrats who (in his mind) impede him. Initially, these agencies look illegitimate mostly to the company of conspiracists and the president’s own base. Beleaguered, ignored, harried, and underfunded, the agencies—once staffed by professionals who responsibly served whatever party is in power—are progressively gutted and demoralized. As they lose competence and capacity, they will come to look more and more illegitimate to more and more people. The steady stream of conspiracist claims has cumulative force.

In a perverse twist, the president then retroactively enlists the very federal government he is discrediting in the effort to validate his claims—the “commandeering of institutions for conspiracist purposes,” as Muirhead and Rosenblum put it. Recall, for instance, the White House’s commission investigating nonexistent electoral fraud, or Trump’s pressure on the National Park Service to produce more favorable photographs of Trump’s inauguration, or the president’s urging of already overworked health and science officials to study his bizarre proposals for treating COVID-19.

A Lot of People Are Saying is among the most clarifying of the recent books in the truth genre because it captures not only the methods and intent of the president’s deceit but also its appeal and impact. Some embrace the barrage of conspiracies as a sign of tribal solidarity with the president’s base and to rejoice in the shock of Trump’s critics. For all the mockery by Trump supporters of liberal sensitivities, Trump’s untruths sell best precisely when feelings overpower facts, when America becomes a safe space for fabrication, when “true enough” is all you need. For those resisting the assault of untruth, a tempting response is simply to tune out, the authors note, “retreating into private life and distancing themselves emotionally from every bit of news about public life.”

The latter response is not an option for those charged with reporting on that public life, for the journalists covering and investigating the Trump administration. As depicted in some of their books, their options involve two different sorts of tribalism—one that adheres to ingrained journalistic conventions or one that adopts a more aggressive stance, at least temporarily, confronting a president who relentlessly demeans reporters’ work, honesty, and motives.

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In *Gaslighting America*, Carpenter suggests that the news media “loves it” when Trump lies, because the

ensuing uproar “keeps people reading the papers, watching their shows, and clicking their links.” It is a cynical view, perhaps informed by the author’s experience in the world of cable-news punditry. And while she is contemptuous of the sycophants defending Trump on television—people with nothing to lose, she writes, those grasping for “a sliver of a chance at stardom”—Carpenter understands the incentives involved. “For those who wanted to board the Trump train, outward expressions of belief in Trump’s grand lies were required.” (Only outward expressions, though; true belief remains optional.)

Journalistic fact-checking appears to exert little influence on Trump; if anything, news media complaints about his truthfulness may enhance his appeal. “His intense commitment to his outlandish ideas is a form of virtue signaling to his base,” Carpenter writes. Fact-checking in the Trump era serves the historical record—an essential task of journalism—but has less power to influence that history in real time, especially when journalists themselves, including the fact-checkers, are a target of the president’s delegitimation campaign. As Carpenter puts it, it’s “like trying to put out a raging forest fire with a garden hose.”

The *Washington Post* had run a fact-checking operation for nearly a decade before the 2016 election, “but we had never encountered a politician like Trump—so cavalier about the facts, so unconcerned with accuracy, so willing to attack people for made-up reasons and so determined to falsely depict his achievements,” the *Post*’s Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly write in their 2020 catalogue of presidential falsehood, *Donald Trump and His Assault on Truth*. Their sample size of thousands of untrue statements is so vast that readers can dip into Trump’s most famous falsehoods (how Mexico will pay for the border wall, or how millions of votes for Hillary Clinton were cast illegally), sift through multiple chapters on Trump’s bogus claims about himself (regarding his wealth and even his ancestry), explore his lies regarding specific policy arenas (say, the size of his tax cut), or even relive the extended dance-mix of mendacity he offered at a single 2019 campaign rally in Battle Creek, Michigan.

During the first three years of his presidency, Trump averaged some fifteen false or misleading claims each day. “But the pace of deception has quickened exponentially,” the *Post* fact-checkers note. Six claims a day in 2017. Nearly sixteen per day in 2018. And more than twenty-two each day in 2019. “If he thinks a false or incorrect claim is a winner,” they explain, “he will repeat it constantly, no matter how often it has been proven wrong.” Most politicians back down after their lies have been publicly revealed, but not so Trump, not even when his favorite social-media platform feels compelled to fact-check his tweets. And that nonstop shamelessness prompted a debate that has bounced around America’s newsrooms during the Trump presidency: When does an untrue statement deserve to be called a lie?

In *Truth in Our Times* (2019), *New York Times* lawyer David E. McCraw recalls the pressures in the newsroom during the 2016 race, when “readers demanded that we call a lie a lie.” In the past, the *Times* had deployed softer terms—*misrepresented* or *misstated*—to characterize deceptions by presidents or presidential candidates. But newsroom editors eventually concluded that “the old rules could no longer hold when there was no doubt that the misstatement was knowing and willful,” McCraw writes. The *l*-word made its way into *Times* headlines during the campaign, though top editors decided they would use it only sparingly lest it lose its power.

“Whether all of Trump’s false statements could be considered lies is certainly subject to dispute,” Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly contend. “Many are exaggerated or factually wrong, but ‘lie’ suggests that a person knows his statements are false.” Some of the president’s statements, they decide, clearly qualify as lies, such as Trump’s claim that he didn’t know about secret payments to cover up his affairs. But they also submit that at times the president convinces himself that a false statement is in fact true, because Trump “lives only for the moment—what he said yesterday may be completely different from what he says today, and he sees no problem in the inconsistency.” (This sounds more like indifference to truth than delusion about it, though that too depends on the president’s unknowable mindset.)

Perhaps the simplest and most persuasive position on this debate appears in *Nation* columnist Eric Alterman’s 2020 book *Lying in State*, a survey of presidential deceit from George Washington to Donald Trump. “A president does not have to mean to lie in order to lie,” Alterman argues. “He just needs to stick to the falsehood once he learns the truth.” Under this definition, a persistent misstatement becomes a lie once it is revealed as false. And because the presidency is about more than one individual, the president must assume responsibility for more than just his own words and intentions. “A presidential lie takes place when the president or someone with the authority to speak for the president seeks to purposely mislead the country about a matter of political significance,” Alterman writes. “The president can remain silent while his subordinates lie

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for him. He can censor the truth or impede the means to discover it.” Given the extent of Trump’s false statements, Alterman is less concerned with divining the intentions behind particular lies than ensuring accountability for them. “Yes,” he concludes, “America has a pathological liar for its president, and literally nothing he says can be taken at face value.”

With a 2016 presidential candidate who threatened to weaken libel laws, the press may have anticipated the wrong battles for the Trump era. McCraw writes that he initially believed the only defenses the press needed were the First Amendment and precedents such as the Supreme Court’s decision in *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964), which made it much harder for public figures to sue for defamation. The *Times* lawyer gained a burst of fame when he wrote an October 2016 letter responding to Trump’s attorneys, who had demanded that the newspaper retract a story about Trump’s behavior toward women. McCraw’s missive, which the *Times* posted online, not only defended the accuracy and newsworthiness of the story but argued that the lawyers’ libel claim was baseless, because “nothing in our article has had the slightest effect on the reputation that Mr. Trump, through his own words and actions, has already created for himself.” The letter concluded with a flourish, telling Trump’s lawyers that the *Times* welcomed “the opportunity to have a court set him straight.”

But McCraw soon realized that legal precedents were not enough to protect journalism in the Trump era. “I finally saw where this was heading,” he explains. “Forget 1964. Forget *Times v. Sullivan*. The war over press freedom was not going to be about changing America’s laws. It was going to be a fight about the very nature of truth.” Legal battles become a secondary concern. After all, McCraw reasons, “why litigate when you can just lie?”

In that fight, there may not be much an in-house counsel can do—except exhort his *Times* colleagues to resist the call of resistance. The newspaper’s core readers are relentless in their disdain for the president, McCraw writes, and he has worried that journalists would “set our compass” by what readers prefer rather than by the reporting the country needs. “We shouldn’t be pursuing an agenda of political resistance or political change,” McCraw writes. Yet while he insists that the underlying objectives of journalism should not change—“there is precious little to save democracy’s day other than transparency, shining the harsh light of truth on the people in power,” he writes—he acknowledges that the president’s attacks on truth may have dimmed the news media’s influence. “It doesn’t matter how much freedom journalists have if no one believes them,” McCraw concludes. “A discredited press plays no role in shaping democracy and holding power accountable.”

In such circumstances, other journalists willingly adopt a more confrontational approach. “I welcome Trumpworld’s hatred,” CNN’s Jim Acosta declares in *The Enemy of the People: A Dangerous Time to Tell the Truth in America* (2019), his memoir on covering the Trump White House. The book begins with the arrival of a pipe bomb at CNN’s offices in New York (mailed by a disturbed Trump supporter) and concludes with Acosta’s successful legal battle to regain his White House pass after the White House arbitrarily revoked it in late 2018, so his feelings are understandable. Acosta fears journalists may be hurt or even killed by the followers of a president who promotes hatred of journalists, calling them dishonest, disgusting, scum, thieves, sleaze, and worse. He worries that Americans are “surrendering our decency, and perhaps our humanity,” under Trump, and that in attacking CNN and other outlets as “fake news” even before winning the Oval Office, Trump attacked not only professional journalists but the profession of truth.

“A different kind of president requires a different kind of press,” Acosta contends, and he has grown more aggressive in the White House briefing room, even holding a testy and memorable debate with presidential adviser Stephen Miller on the role of immigration in American life. The 2017 exchange, which transcended the normal question-and-answer format, proved revealing and newsworthy, with the president’s most influential voice on immigration accusing Acosta of “cosmopolitan bias” and arguing that the Emma Lazarus poem “The New Colossus,” at the base of the Statue of Liberty, was only “added later” and does not speak to America’s immigrant traditions. Viewers learned something about the administration’s thinking and historical interpretations, which means that Acosta was doing his job right.

Acosta’s adversarial approach can also veer into silliness at times. When White House press secretary Sean Spicer suspended televised coverage of press briefings, CNN’s correspondent snapped a picture of his socks during a briefing and shared it on Twitter. “The Spicer off-camera/no audio gaggle has begun,” Acosta tweeted. “I can’t show you a pic of Sean. So here is a look at some new socks I bought over the wknd.” In his book,

Acosta notes with pride how “the sock tweet went viral.” (Congrats, Jim!) He regards social media as something of an equalizing force, but the platform can also equalize pettiness. “I vented my frustrations on Twitter,” Acosta admits. “Hey, if *they* can do it, my thought was, why can’t *we*?”

In *The Enemy of the People*, CNN’s chief White House correspondent often doubles as a political pundit. He argues that defeating Trump should have been a “layup” for the Democrats in 2016. The son of Cuban immigrants, Acosta reveals how he took the administration’s immigration positions personally and how he believes U.S. presidents should always champion immigrants. “That’s the American way, even if it’s not Trump’s way,” he asserts. Indeed, in these pages, Acosta frequently passes judgment on what is and is not truly American. Trump’s attacks on the news media are “un-American,” while the crowds at Trump rallies are “not a true reflection of America, mind you,” he explains. “They were overwhelmingly white, blue-collar, and elderly.” (This, after bragging about how well he relates to the pro-Trump crowd: “I get blue-collar folks.... I am more like them than the man they come to the rallies to see.”) Even as he assails the president and his supporters for not reflecting the country’s values or complexion, Acosta is appalled that Trump has so vilified members of the press that journalists now seem “anti-American” to the president’s supporters.

That vilification has had more severe consequences than even Acosta may have feared. The threat to journalism under Trump has come from more than some unhinged, violent supporter of the president. Law enforcement officers have harassed, arrested, and even assaulted journalists fulfilling their constitutional right—and professional duty—to cover protests against racism and police brutality. The rights of both demonstrators and reporters are covered by the First Amendment, yet the very agents of the state charged with protecting such rights have threatened their free exercise.

Acosta believes that the tensions between the press and the presidency can be dialed back in a post-Trump America. “As new presidents come along and return a state of normalcy to dealings with the news media, will there be as great a need to stand up for ourselves?” he asks. “Of course not.” It is a confidence unsupported by the story Acosta himself tells. “A free society,” he argues at the end of his book, “cannot sustain the collective weight of the kind of abuse we’ve endured without its institutions, and its people, undergoing a profound metamorphosis.” The press is hardly immune to such transformations, which will go well beyond calling lies by their proper name or asking tougher questions at press conferences. American newsrooms are experiencing a defining, generational debate between journalists hewing to old standards of neutrality and objectivity and others more willing to confront and take public sides in battles over race, truth, and justice—battles that they see in clear moral terms. There will be no return to “normalcy,” even if one were desirable, after Trump’s time in the White House is over.

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When Sean Spicer stood behind the podium in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room in the White House on January 21, 2017, and insisted that the crowd on the National Mall the prior day had been “the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period,” his lie was a conventional lie—an effort to have Americans believe a specific and verifiable untruth. But the demands on public credulity and belief did not stop there.

When White House adviser Kellyanne Conway defended her colleague the next day on *Meet the Press*, saying that Spicer had merely offered “alternative facts” about the inauguration, she went further in degrading the truth, granting viewers permission to pick and choose among different versions of reality—truth as multiple choice. A year and a half later, when Trump addressed a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Kansas City, Missouri, he offered a more authoritarian version of truth, asserting that only his own preferred reality—on whatever subject—could be considered valid. “Stick with us,” he urged. “Don’t believe the crap you see from these people, the fake news.... Just remember: What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening.”

Shortly thereafter, when the president’s attorney Rudy Giuliani explained in an August 2018 television interview why he didn’t want Trump to testify before the special counsel investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election, he said he feared the president would be caught in a perjury trap if he contradicted someone else’s version of the truth, because “truth isn’t truth.” This is truth as shrug emoji: everyone says something different, so why bother trying to figure it out?

And finally, when Republican members of the U.S. Senate argued that the Trump impeachment trial did not require witnesses because they already knew the facts of the president’s misdeeds but would still do nothing

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about it, they went further still—in their eyes, even the knowable truth no longer mattered.

This final move is consistent with the attitudes of the party's base. "In the age of Trump, there is evidence that Republicans have grown less concerned about presidents being honest than they were a decade ago," Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly explain. In 2007, they report, a poll found that 71 percent of Republicans, 70 percent of Democrats, and 66 percent of independents considered it "extremely important" for presidential candidates to be honest. In 2018, the percentages for Democrats and independents had not changed, but the share of Republicans had declined to 49 percent. "Many Republicans realize that Trump often lies, yet they have decided that truth-telling is less important than the message he sends about the country's sorry state and the forces he blames for its troubles."

These attitudes are inseparable from the media diet and information sources of conservative voters, which makes them inseparable from what CNN's Brian Stelter calls "the Trumpification of Fox and the Foxification of America." In his 2020 book *Hoax: Donald Trump, Fox News, and the Dangerous Distortion of Truth*, Stelter provides an obsessively insider account of the news network in the Trump era—full of backstabbing and extramarital affairs and who got which job and why. But above all, Stelter captures the reinforcing cycles of disinformation between Trump and the network, particularly between the president and prime-time host Sean Hannity, who doubles as a key informal adviser, and the morning show *Fox & Friends*, which offered Trump a platform long before he decided to run for president and which would become the Trump White House's daily sounding board.

"Trump's entanglement with Fox has no historical precedent," Stelter writes. "Never before has a TV network effectively produced the president's intelligence briefing and staffed the federal bureaucracy. Never before has a president promoted a single TV channel, asked the hosts for advice behind closed doors, and demanded for them to be fired when they step out of line." Stelter likens it all, fittingly, to a TV series starring "a dysfunctional White House, a delusional president, and a drama-filled network misinforming him from morning through night."

And loyal viewers suffered for that misinformation. Stelter points to the federal government's poor preparedness for the coronavirus pandemic and notes how, "when the virus was silently spreading across the United States, some of Fox's biggest stars denied and downplayed the threat posed by the virus; Trump echoed them; and they echoed back." Together, the network and the president magnify each other's distortions of truth and fact. "Through 'hoax' and 'fake news' and 'witch hunt,' Trump and Fox changed the language of politics," Stelter writes. The network's straight-news journalists struggle to retain their credibility, while shows such as Hannity's deliver "pure propaganda" in support of the president. And when an increasingly radicalized audience demands more propaganda, Fox News serves it up. A former *Fox & Friends* producer explains the logic to Stelter: "People don't care if it's right, they just want their side to win. That's who this show is for."

The CNN anchor accuses Fox News of enabling Trump's "creeping authoritarianism." And for many of the authors of the Trump-era truth literature, the fashioning of alternative realities indeed threatens America's two-and-a-half-century-old democratic experiment. "Without truth, democracy is hobbled," writes Kakutani, who warns of nihilism spreading across the country. Kavanaugh and Rich argue that without consensus over facts, data and their good-faith interpretation, "it becomes nearly impossible to have the types of meaningful policy debates that form the foundation of democracy." Nichols contends that anti-intellectualism is "short-circuiting democracy," blinding us to the consequences of our choices. Muirhead and Rosenblum emphasize that the new conspiracism succeeds in "hollowing out democracy" and makes citizens believe that representative government simply does not work, certainly not on their behalf.

Despite offering such dire admonitions, their proposed fixes mostly vary from the obvious to the dutiful to overly narrow. Kakutani calls on citizens to protect the institutional checks and balances connecting the three branches of government and to stick up for an independent press. Andersen, too, urges us to "call out the dangerously untrue and unreal." Carpenter encourages readers to stop asking Trump to correct himself or apologize, which he appears incapable of ever doing. Instead, "ask him to explain himself," she suggests. "That's where he struggles." And true to their calling as social scientists, Kavanaugh and Rich stop short of actionable solutions and instead serve up 114 possible question topics meriting deeper research, divided into four broad categories and twenty-two subgroups. (So RANDy.)

Muirhead and Rosenblum agree that calling out lies and conspiracies is a "moral imperative," especially for elected officials, but they are not optimistic about the ability of truth and transparency to counteract threats to the reality-based community. "Transparency can be manipulated and marketed," they caution, "and

conspiracists can twist and exploit the very materials transparency makes accessible.” (Consider the unending backlash against the report by special counsel Robert Mueller, which the president still seeks to discredit, rewrite, and relitigate.) However, they point to a process they call “enacting democracy” as a possible antidote. Though they dress it up in overly academic prose, enacting democracy simply means faithful attention to regular order; that is, explaining and following the standard procedures and mechanisms of political life and public decision-making. (It is reminiscent of Yuval Levin’s approach in *A Time to Build*: Given your role here, how should you behave?) In the Trump era, this may be the most revolutionary tactic of all.

Enacting democracy “entails a literal articulation of how each step in the process of legislating, prosecuting, regulating or investigating (or even campaigning) adheres to fair processes,” Muirhead and Rosenblum write. It is what they call “politics as pedagogy.” This is the Trump presidency as a teachable moment for a democracy that has forgotten its civics lessons or, remembering them still, has decided they don’t matter.

In this context, for example, Mitt Romney’s lone Republican vote to convict the president for abuse of power in the Senate impeachment trial is less notable for its effect on the outcome—Trump was still comfortably acquitted—than for Romney’s eloquent explanation of the meaning and weight of the oath he swore when the impeachment trial began. “My promise before God to apply impartial justice required that I put my personal feelings and biases aside,” Romney explained on the Senate floor. “Were I to ignore the evidence that has been presented, and disregard what I believe my oath and the Constitution demands of me for the sake of a partisan end, it would, I fear, expose my character to history’s rebuke and the censure of my own conscience.”

If democracy is a process, truth is, too, and that is one of the more lasting lessons of these volumes. McIntyre agrees with many of his fellow authors that official lies must be exposed and that truth-tellers should “hit people between the eyes” with facts. But more insidious than any one untruth the president dreams up or repeats is “the corruption of the process by which facts are credibly gathered and reliably used to shape one’s beliefs about reality.” Truth implies not instant and righteous conviction but investigation, analysis, and discernment; it is about discovery, not positioning. “Knowledge does not demand certainty,” Muirhead and Rosenblum emphasize. “It demands doubt.”

In *Post-Truth*, McIntyre offers some annoying advice. “One of the most important ways to fight back against post-truth is to fight it within ourselves,” he writes. “It is easy to identify a truth that someone else does not want to see. But how many of us are prepared to do this with our *own* beliefs? To doubt something that *we want to believe*, even though a little piece of us whispers that we do not have all the facts?”

Such counsel temporarily takes the focus off Trump and his acolytes and their lies, and casts the gaze inward, toward discomforting self-reflection, at a moment when argument and judgment seem like all that matter. But that doesn’t make it wrong. Or untrue.

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SIX

SEE SOME I.D.

“You’re living in poverty. Your schools are no good. You have no jobs.... What the hell do you have to lose?” That was Donald Trump’s pitch to African American voters late in the 2016 presidential race, delivered at a rally in a mostly white suburb of Lansing, Michigan. Embedded in the candidate’s contempt was the answer to his question: when people are dismissed, reduced, and undifferentiated, what they stand to lose is their individual dignity.

In the Trump era, identity politics—the quest for justice, recognition, respect, or power by people coalescing around race, gender, or other overlapping characteristics—has been an energizing and polarizing force. It can be a tool for equality, or a means of exclusion. It can be a rallying cry for America’s minorities, or a torch lit by its white nationalists. From Charlottesville to Minneapolis, from NFL sidelines to Lafayette Park, the terrain of identity politics is everywhere, and everywhere it is contentious. The impulse to be heard and the desire to belong are natural and necessary, but in its more dogmatic iterations, identity politics can also demonize opponents, infantilize proponents, and, as we’ve seen, move from a resource of the marginalized to a weapon of a resentful majority.

Hillary Clinton embraced it and lost; Donald Trump stoked it and won.

The poles of identity do not stand across the usual left-right divides. Some of the more prominent attacks on left-wing identity politics come from traditional bastions of American liberalism. In *The Once and Future Liberal* (2017), Columbia University historian Mark Lilla worries that modern liberalism is too preoccupied with diversity, too fascinated with “the margins of society,” to offer a robust alternative to an ascendant right. Rather than obsess over microaggressions and cultural appropriation, Lilla argues, the Left must concentrate on winning elections and exerting power—and that means refocusing on a far broader sense of “we,” on a solidarity that transcends the particularistic attachments of identity. Former *New York Times* columnist and editor Bari Weiss frames this battle in quasi-religious terms. “Worship of the group over the dignity of the individual, which we are seeing on the far left, is worship of another false deity,” she contends in *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, published in 2019. And Stanford University political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who once heralded Western liberal democracy as the last man standing among history’s political ideologies, regards identity politics as a threat to liberal democracy, a diversion from problems such as economic inequality, which he believes should preoccupy the Left. How can we come together to solve anything big when we keep slicing ourselves into smaller factions? “Down this road lies, ultimately, state breakdown and failure,” Fukuyama warns in *Identity* (2018).

Such authors make an alarming case, but it is complicated by the flood of recent memoirs, histories, studies, and manifestos of identity. Without a doubt, reading through the identity literature of the Trump era reveals an insular genre that at times indulges in what Lilla calls a “pseudo-politics of self-regard.” Even so, in their search for new language, insistence on new vantage points, and demands for equality, these works can also propel readers toward a cause consistent with those broad-based aspirations of liberal democracy. That cause is the individual.

If the logic of identity politics divides us into smaller and smaller slivers, as its critics fear, that sequence ends, inexorably, with an identity of one, of each person. Underlying many of these books, even those arguing most stridently and effectively for group rights and representation, is an almost desperate affirmation of individuality. And the only way to protect and uphold the individual—every individual—is through universal rights and principles. So, yes, we must move toward a politics of solidarity. But for solidarity to endure, for it to mean something real for everyone, we must grapple with the politics of identity. In *The Souls of Yellow Folk*