Authoritarian Responses to Social Change: Psychological Mechanisms Underlying the Election of Donald Trump

Joan S. Rabin

The election of Donald Trump sent shock waves across America and the world. How could an openly sexist, racist, semi-literate, multiply bankrupt businessman and shallow television personality with no political experience, become the president of the most powerful country in the world?

The election also highlighted the most invidious anti-democratic feature built into American democracy, the Electoral College. In the United States of America, it was not a voter majority of three million for candidate Hillary Clinton that determined the 2016 election of the president but rather an archaic system of each state having a set number of electoral college votes based on population, but undermined by a system whereby the winner gets all of the state’s Electoral College votes. Only Maine and Nebraska apportion the votes. For the other 48 states it is a winner-takes—all system that empowers the many small population, mostly rural states and disempowers the large population, mostly urban/suburban states.

This archaic anti-democratic system was the result of one of the many compromises that allowed all 13 states to agree to a single American Constitution. The Electoral College was a compromise between those who wanted Congress to choose the president and those who wanted a direct popular vote. At the time of the Constitutional Convention no country in the world directly elected its leader.

The College was put forth as a way to give citizens the opportunity to vote in presidential elections, with the added safeguard of a group of knowledgeable electors with final say on who would ultimately lead the country, another limit on the burgeoning nation’s democratic ideals. (Nalewicki, 2016, para. 1)

There is little acknowledgement that a majority of American voters did not elect Donald Trump. In any other democratic system in the world, Hillary Clinton would now be president of the United States. This must be taken into account when asking

J. S. Rabin
Department of Psychology, Towson University, Towson, MD, USA
e-mail: jsrabin@towson.edu
how such an unqualified candidate could be elected president. He wasn’t, as far as the American people are concerned. It was the Electoral College that made Donald Trump president, not the American people.

**Authoritarianism Rising**

The answer to how an authoritarian like Trump could possibly be elected under any circumstances, is complex but clear. The social, emotional, and psychological consequences of rapid social change, added to the social and economic aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession (Mukunda, 2018), propelled a fierce populism with strong authoritarian underpinnings. The power of social media was hijacked while the right-wing news megaliths distorted reality and purposefully triggered anger and fear in their followers. This situation far too closely resembles the conditions that gave rise to Hitler and Mussolini (Albright, 2018; Arendt, 1951; Posner, 2018; Snyder, 2017; Stanley, 2018; Sunstein, 2018, 2019). Trump’s authoritarian style is pervasive, and he closely follows much of Hitler’s playbook even though he is not actually a fascist ideologue, but rather, a malignant narcissist (Albright, 2018; Mattison, 2016).

**Cognitive Closure and Authoritarianism**

In the 1990s social psychologist, Arie Kruglanski, created the term “need for closure” (NFC) to explain why some people will accept any answer to an important question, just to stop the discomfort of not knowing. Humans are a species in need of answers. Humans abhor being in a state of cognitive ambiguity and confusion (Zimbardo, 1969). Human cognitive motivation is all about answering the question: why? *Homo sapiens* has a profound need to understand why things happen in order to have some sense of control in the world.

“The need for closure (NFC) has been defined as a desire for a definite answer to a question, as opposed to uncertainty, confusion, or ambiguity” (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009, abstract). Democracies around the world are experiencing populist surges and new authoritarian leaders. High need for closure, as an individual disposition, may affect people’s attraction towards those (authoritarian) attitudes or ideologies that promise stability, order, powerful leadership and discipline, and towards those political parties that fulfil these criteria (Chirumbolo, 2002; Onraet, Van Hiel, Roets, & Cornelis, 2011; Roets & Van Hiel, 2006). This process is far more blatant in certain specific situations and can partially explain why conditions of social insecurity caused by rapid changes in society, or by economic or political crises, are often associated with a shift to the right of the electorate. Authoritarianism thrives on certainty. Matthew MacWilliams (2016) has determined that the trait which most predicts a Trump supporter is authoritarianism.
**Motivation by Hope or Fear (and Anger)**

The conventional account holds that authoritarian populists catalyze public anxiety about the changing social order and/or deteriorating national economic conditions, and this anxiety subsequently drives up support for the far right. We propose that while emotions do indeed play an independent causal role in support for far-right parties and policies, that support is more likely built upon the public’s anger rather than fear. (Vasilopoulos, Marcus, Valentino, & Foucault, 2019, abstract)

Jost (2019) worked with Vasilopoulos et al. (2019) to re-analyze their data and found mutual agreement that “anger and authoritarianism both mediate the effect of fear on support for the Far Right” (abstract).

Authoritarians prey on fear and anger. Professor of political science, Bo Rothstein (2018), draws a distinction not between liberals and conservatives but rather on whether they operate with “politics based on fear versus politics based on hope” (para. 1). In both the United States and Europe today, people can be divided into “those who are geared toward environmentalism, internationalism and the extension of civil liberties against those who defend traditional authorities, established religious authorities and their own nation” (Rothstein, 2018, para. 1). Unfortunately, the former group has been using the fear of environmental collapse, to try to focus voter’s attention on the problem. Rothstein advocates using the hope of environmental renewal as both more effective and just plain better in motivating people. He maintains that fear is never a good way to motivate people on either side of the political spectrum.

What is it about species *Homo sapiens* that makes us so susceptible to authoritarianism? The answer lies in our psychological make-up.

**Human Social Vulnerability**

Why are humans so susceptible to authoritarianism? The answer lies in our psychological make-up which evolved in circumstances very different from the rapid social change that typifies the modern era.

**Finding Meaning in Life**

Humans are unique in their depth of cognitive motivation. *Homo sapiens* is the only species that needs to find meaning in life. Since humans are all too aware that everyone will sooner, or later die, psychological survival demands that there be a point to living (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszcznski, 2015).

When individuals state that their lives are meaningful this implies that (a) they are positively committed to some concept of the meaning of life; (b) they have a framework or have derived a set of life goals, purpose in life or life view from these; (c) they see themselves as
having fulfilled or as being in the process of fulfilling their framework or life goals; (d) they experience this fulfilment as a feeling of significance. (Debats, 1996, p. 9)

Both health and longevity are improved by having a purpose in life (Alimujiang et al., 2019). How one responds to this human need to make life meaningful becomes part of personal identity. Existential need for meaning presents a deep vulnerability to those whose lives are upended by rapid social change.

**Social Beings**

Humans are social creatures whose very survival depends on our social attachments to family, kin, friends, and community. People are highly vulnerable to social ostracism and highly motivated toward social conformity. Everyone just wants to belong. Social identity is a potential source of self-esteem but protecting that self-esteem may lead to disparaging out-groups, even to the point of prejudice and discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

However, being accepted and going along with whatever the group is doing are linked together in ways that can become highly problematic. People will do terrible things in groups that they would never do as individuals (i.e. lynching, rape, arson, and total property destruction).

The growth of white nationalist/white supremacy groups has been directly fostered by Donald Trump’s senior policy advisor, Steven Miller, who is also Trump’s chief speech writer. Miller is an active part of a political strategy that seeks to rehabilitate toxic political notions of racial superiority, stokes fear of immigrants and minorities to inflame grievances for political ends, and attempts to build a notion of an embattled white majority which has to defend its power by any means necessary. These notions, once the preserve of fringe white nationalist groups, have increasingly infiltrated the mainstream of American political and cultural discussion, with poisonous results. (Clark, 2020, para. 1)

**Significance Quest Theory**

Many members of extreme right-wing groups report that being deeply attached to a hate group gives their lives great meaning and purpose as well as supporting their identities (Kruglanski, Jasko, Webber, Chernikova, & Molinario, 2018). Arie Kruglanski and his co-researchers have put forward a theory of violent extremism which they call Significance Quest Theory (SQT). This theory focuses on three factors: need, narrative, and network. The need to have meaning in life, to matter to others, and to be someone, creates an overall need for personal significance. Compared to an ideological narrative that justifies violence and a social network of people who find violence justifiable to support their beliefs, the need for personal significance is the major force underlying violent extremism.
Human beings have a fundamental, social species need to be thought well of by others. Evolutionarily derived sociality makes psychological and physical isolation highly problematic for most people. Approval of others helps to maintain social-emotional balance. “The need for significance encapsulates other needs that have been identified as definitive of the human condition, including the desires to gain respect, competence, esteem, and meaning in life” (Kruglanski et al., 2018, p. 112). If life circumstances have given an individual little opportunity for meeting these basic human psychological needs, then significance quest motivation can become dominant.

In the 1980s a white supremacist group at the bottom of the SES scale in America formed an entity called the sovereign citizens. Membership grew significantly in the aftermath of the 2008 recession which brought about both high unemployment, psychological and economic dislocation. Sovereign citizens are conspiracy theorists who see themselves as revolutionaries fighting against an illegitimate government rather than as powerless and unimportant in American society (Chua, 2018). Ironically, African Americans also join the sovereign citizens, not realizing the racist roots of the organization.

**Working Class Despair**

A possible alternative to dying of despair through alcohol and/or drug addiction, or from committing suicide (Case & Deaton, 2017), is to find meaning in belonging to a vibrant and empowering social movement. The allure of white nationalist extremist groups can counter the sense of hopelessness felt by some desperate economically stressed people. “Despair as a sociological phenomenon is rarely permanent: Some force, or forces, will supply new forms of meaning eventually. And it matters not only that this happens, but which forces those will be” (Douthat, 2019, p. SR9).

**The Enormity of the Great Recession of 2008**

In the US alone, the great recession erased about $8 tn in household stock-market wealth and $6 tn in home value. From 2003 to 2013, inflation-adjusted net wealth for a typical household fell 36%, from $87,992 to $56,335, while the net worth of wealthy households rose by 14%. Workers without college degrees and low-income Americans were especially hard hit.

In addition to causing such widespread deprivation, the 2008 crash stripped the sheen off global capitalism. Just as the Iraq war undermined the authority of the US foreign policy establishment, so did the financial crisis discredit the bankers, asset managers, ratings agencies, and regulators responsible for running the world economy. Compounding that damage was the government’s decision to bail out many of the same institutions – Bank of America, Citigroup, Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase and Wells Fargo – that had caused the crisis. (Massing, 2020, para. 8–9)
Barack Obama gave people hope, Donald Trump gave people a promise of escape from despair and encouragement to vent their rage. Neither was successful in directly bettering the majority of those lives suffering the greatest economic and social devastation by the Great Recession (December 2007–June 2009). The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities created a chart book tracking the economic downturn. “It shows how deep a hole the Great Recession created — and how much deeper that hole would have been without the financial stabilization and fiscal stimulus policies enacted in late 2008 and early 2009. And it documents the return to stronger labor market conditions by the end of the period” (2019, para. 2). Despite the economic salvation that Barack Obama’s policies provided for the country, and the avoidance of another Great Depression, the perception of most Americans was that the banks that caused the recession were bailed out by the government while they were left to suffer.

The bailout of the very banks that had caused the Great Recession by their greed and lawlessness, infuriated most Americans. “Fundamentally, the American (and world) economy was crippled by the actions of the leaders of the American financial sector, and the U.S. government chose to “punish” those leaders by giving them enormous sums of money through bailouts” (Mukunda, 2018, para. 4). It doesn’t matter whether this was good economic policy or even that the recovery from the Great Recession has finally begun to happen. People care very much about fairness and what happened cannot be justified as fair by any standards.

Justice is generally conceived of in one of two ways. The first, and more common, one is that justice is fairness. In a fair world, good behavior is rewarded and bad acts (usually meaning acts that contravene generally accepted norms) are punished. Economists and people with significant training in economics, however, often conceive of justice as efficiency — that is, the just outcome is the one that maximizes welfare. Although this is how economists often see it, most people have a very different perspective. Psychology experiments show that most people — and even monkeys! — believe that justice is fairness, and believe it so strongly that they will pay significant costs to protest unfair outcomes. People given the chance to punish someone who has betrayed them in a game, for example, will generally take it even if doing so leaves them worse off. They explicitly choose fairness over efficiency. (Mukunda, 2018, para. 5)

Gautam Murunda, in this excerpt from the Harvard Business Review, is referring to two important experiments on fairness and justice. Capuchin monkeys will become enraged if a monkey in an adjacent cage is given a better reward for the same behavior (Brosnan, 2013). This research emphasizes that there is an evolutionary history to the development of a sense of fairness in primates, including the human primate (Hetzer & Sornette, 2013). Economists rely heavily on the “Ultimatum Game” created by Güth, Schmittberger, & Schwarze, 1982 to examine
how differing variables affect fairness and punishment in people (Güth & Kocher, 2013).

Because fairness and justice are so ingrained in the human species, the bank bailout still rankles, leaving major political consequences. The aftermath of the Great Recession is still being felt by many, both emotionally and financially.

During the depression of the 1930s, Americans turned to the federal government for aid in their economic recovery. But in response to the Great Recession of 2008, a majority of Americans turned away from it (Hochschild, 2018, p. 8).

The Media and Politics

Media coverage of politics breaks down into very different formats. Legacy media are the traditional major newspapers and television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS). The digital world has exploded with social media communication outlets beyond Email: YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. Cable and satellite television have brought every manner of specialty channel including news networks that silo conservative or liberal perspectives.

Donald Trump has called the media “the enemy of the people”, a profound authoritarian attack on democracy. However, Trump excludes Fox news from this condemnation. He loves Fox news, watches it pretty much exclusively, and for much of the day.

Rupert Murdoch’s Media Empire

Jonathan Mahler and Jim Rutenberg (2019) of The New York Times have investigated the media power brokering of Rupert Murdoch and his sons. Three major world democracies are being continuously undermined by Murdoch’s media empire of newspapers and television networks (Great Britain, Australia, and the United States). Murdoch fiercely advocated for Brexit, filling the news with lies that convinced many Britons that severing ties with the European Union was in their interest. Murdoch is so powerful in Australia that he succeeded in getting the country’s carbon tax repealed “and pushed out a series of prime ministers whose agenda didn’t comport with his own” (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019, I love all my children, para. 3).

Dan Cassino (2016) has written a book on the influence of Fox News on American politics. According to Cassino, Fox News determined the fate of the various candidates for president in the 2012 Republican presidential primary. Sadly, for democracy, exposure to Fox News makes Americans less knowledgeable about complex information. Fox News is also a major source of conspiracy theories that have no basis in fact (Cassino, 2016).

Murdock’s Fox News gave Trump the unwavering support he needed to win the presidency. Without Fox News to interpret and translate, Trump would have been far less likely to sway so many people with his irrational tirades.
Race in America According to Fox (State-Run) News

Donald Trump listens to Fox news obsessively. It is his only major source of information. In many ways Fox news functions as state-run television (Duffy, 2019). It echoes and supports pretty much everything that Trump says. But Fox commentators go farther. They set political policy for Trump by advocating certain positions or criticizing others (Mayer, 2019).

Donald Trump’s 2016 election was based on race and perceived threat (Buckwalter, 2018; Cohen, Fowler, Medenica, & Rogowski, 2017; Knowles & Tropp, 2018). Trump has continued his open racism (Lopez, 2019) abetted by Fox news, where racism is redefined, denied, toned down, and distorted.

For the uninitiated, here are some of the main features of the racial narrative Fox and other conservative outlets weave:

• Actual racial discrimination against African Americans and other minorities is largely a thing of the past.
• The most common victims of racial discrimination today are white people, who are regularly elbowed aside by minorities given government benefits they don’t deserve.
• Liberals constantly accuse conservatives of being racist with zero justification, an accusation that can be impossible to refute.
• When minorities criticize government policy, it shows they are unpatriotic and “ungrateful.”
• People of color are held back by their own pathologies.
• Democrats are The Real Racists, which is proven by the fact that their party was pro-slavery during the Civil War and many twentieth-century segregationists were Democrats (Waldman, 2019, para. 5).

TrumpXplainers

Conservative newspaper columnist, Bret Stephens uses the term “TrumpXplainers” to describe certain political pundits, many from Fox News (Sykes, 2017), who try to make sense of the word salad from Trump’s speeches. For instance, Trump would give a speech or offer an answer in a debate that amounted to little more than a word jumble.

But rather than quote Trump, or point out that what he had said was grammatically and logically nonsensical, the TrumpXplainers would tell us what he had allegedly meant to say. They became our political semioticians, ascribing pattern and meaning to the rune-stones of Trump’s mind. (Stephens, 2017, para. 62, 63)

Mainstream Media Collusion

Matthew MacWilliams (2016) details how even the legacy media wound up inadvertently supporting Trump during the 2016 election by giving him inordinate amounts of coverage, because they made money doing it. Trump is vastly entertaining in his
manner and the muck he puts out, grabs attention and media coverage (Stephens, 2017). Margaret Sullivan (2019a, 2019b) is highly critical of the mainstream media for soft pedaling much of the racist, sexist, homophobic, islamophobic, anti-immigrant, generally inflammatory, and profoundly anti-democratic things that Trump regularly says. Sullivan urges the media to stop using euphemisms for the openly racist, sexist, homophobic, and just plain stupid things the president says. The media need to challenge the president more directly and more often on his daily litany of false statements. Even if journalists and news media do fight back, nothing can stop Trump’s negative pall on the country “but it may help an overwhelmed and numbed public find renewed reason to care” (Sullivan, 2019a, para. 31).

Trump’s vicious nicknames for opponents are a personal specialty. “Crooked Hillary” damaged Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential race. “Lyin’ Ted” was effective in diminishing Ted Cruz during the Republican primary. Currently, Trump is calling Joe Biden, former Vice President of the United States, “SleepyCreepy Joe”. In 2019, Biden polled higher than any other Democratic primary candidate when pitted against Trump for the 2020 presidential campaign.

The worse the perceived political threat, perhaps, the more vicious the nickname. (Sullivan, 2019b, para. 15).

Trump’s nicknames are strangely appealing to many voters. The news media are automatically attracted to attention getting phenomena. Trump’s nicknames are ready made for “newsiness”. Mainstream, traditional news outlets cover Trump-made nicknames right along with the right-wing companies, Fox News, Breitbart and Drudge Report. Margaret Sullivan takes Trump nicknames very seriously. “They are often false and always meant to bully. And the news media must stop trafficking in them.” (Sullivan, 2019b, para. 11).

The Media and Donald Trump’s Deep Narcissism

Many psychologists and psychiatrists have called attention to the narcissistic grandiosity openly and consistently displayed by Donald Trump (Buser & Cruz, 2017; Cole, 2019; Garau, 2017; Gartner, 2017; Lee, 2017). George Conway, Washington attorney and political conservative who was considered for two positions in the Trump administration, now accuses Trump of dangerous foreign policy, based on Trump’s “pathological narcissism.” Conway calls out to the media to focus more actively on the narcissism problem (CNN Business, 2019). In a July 11 Tweet, Conway focuses on President Trump having described himself as “so great looking and smart, a true Stable Genius” (Budryk, 2019, para. 3).

New Tools for Undermining Democracy

A plethora of new politically relevant terms have appeared in online and broadcast media.
To understand how political influence is exerted through social media, new language is necessary. But this is not just about vocabulary. The concepts generated by these terms have profound implications for democracy.

Totalitarianism is made far easier by access to these new tools as the Russian manipulation of the 2016 election makes evident. “A meticulous analysis of online activity during the 2016 campaign makes a powerful case that targeted cyberattacks by hackers and trolls were decisive” (Mayer, 2018, para. 1).

**Deepfake**

The name is a combination of deep learning and fake. Deepfakes are videos that have been altered by highly sophisticated artificial intelligence techniques (deep learning tools). It is now easy to superimpose any person’s face over a face on an existing video and add audio to the existing video. The technology has been updated to such a high level using a technique called generative adversarial network, that the altered video appears entirely authentic. To achieve this end requires both time and training (Guera & Delp, 2018).

**FSGAN**

Face swapping general adversarial network (FSGAN) is a breakthrough technique that allows deepfakes to be created very quickly and easily. On August 16, 2019 researchers Yuval Nirkin, Yosi Keller and Tal Hassner announced to the cyberworld that a game changing technology now exists that has huge political implications. Face swapping is the task of transferring a face from source to target image, so that it seamlessly replaces a face appearing in the target and produces a realistic result. … Face reenactment (aka face transfer or puppeteering) uses the facial movements and expression deformations of a control face in one video to guide the motions and deformations of a face appearing in a video or image. (Nirkin, Keller, & Hassner, 2019, Introduction, para. 1)

Because FSGAN can do face swapping and face reenactment simultaneously it is no longer necessary to be trained in GANS. Non-experts can now quickly create deepfakes. This means that the abuse of their technology for political manipulation is going to happen much more frequently than in the past. FSGAN can operate in real time. The implications for the 2020 American presidential election as well as the congressional elections is profoundly concerning. Reality and truth will be even more distorted than in the current media manipulations.

**Bot**

The name bot comes from robot but unlike robots, bots have no physical presence. They are computer programs, or software applications, that are capable of invading the internet with continuous bombardments of repetitive information. Bots can
sound like humans and can be interacted with. Apple company’s voice application, Siri, is a bot (Mitroff, 2016).

Bots can also enter the media world as “tweets” that go out to enormous numbers of twitter accounts (Baraniuk, 2018). Information is politically skewed to engage voters and encourage them to “retweet” the message, thereby further spreading dis-\nsension, falsehoods, and hacked or leaked politically sensitive information.

**Spambots**

A spambot is a computer program specifically designed to gather e-mail addresses from the Internet, with the purpose of creating mailing lists for sending unsolicited e-mail, or “spam”. Spambots can acquire e-mail addresses from a variety of sources including, conversations from online chat-rooms, Web sites, newsgroups, and even postings from special-interest groups (SIG) (Whatis.com, 2020). If the activities of a bot are malicious then it is a spambot. Spambots are a major cause of breaches in computer security (Vincent, 2017).

**Memes**

Memes most closely resemble traditional political cartooning. They use humor to either support or belittle a candidate (Flynn, 2019). Captioned photos are the most common form. The key to memes is that they spread very quickly on social media (Gill, 2019).

The sociobiologist, Richard Dawkins (1976) introduced the word meme to evoke imitation. He described memes as being the cultural transmission of special information, passed rapidly from individual to individual.

**Alt-Right**

Alternative right (Alt-Right) refers to extreme conservatives who have typically endorsed racism, white supremacy, nativism, anti-Semitism, anti-feminism, and homophobia. “The Alternative Right is characterized by heavy use of social media and online memes. Alt-righters eschew ‘establishment’ conservatism, skew young, and embrace white ethnonationalism as a fundamental value” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017, para. 1). The Alt-Right is deeply offended by political correctness which is perceived as limiting the freedom to behave as they wish (Benko, 2017).

**Trolls**

Trolls are individual human beings who post material online with the intent to make readers angry; they are baiting them. Trolls clearly identify themselves and happily make trouble with inflammatory messages. They can be of any political persuasion
or none, but mostly trolls are right-wing extremists, the Alt-Right, and neo-Nazis (Benko, 2017).

The Alt-Right tribe of trolls come through three online troll-distribution centers: 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit (Abramson, 2017). An alt-right troll will be obsessed with the Second Amendment even if they’ve never held a gun; to an alt-righter, gun-toting Americans are metaphors for America’s commitment to a unique, frontier-like society in which personal freedoms are religiously prized (Benko, 2017, para. 8).

An even more disturbing issue is that the evidence strongly indicates that Russian government trolls and hackers swung the 2016 election to Donald Trump (Jamieson, 2018; Mayer, 2018). In a book called *Cyberwar*, professor of Communications, Kathleen Jamieson (2018) documented how Russian trolls targeted white Christians and military veterans to stir them up and orient them toward Trump, while simultaneously demobilizing African Americans and Sanders supporters with defeatist messages to keep them from supporting Hillary Clinton. The Russian government ran a troll factory that employed vast numbers of gifted young hackers and trolls. “Fear appeal was a key feature of the troll messaging” (Jamieson, 2018, p. 37).

### Sockpuppets

Unlike trolls, sockpuppets enter online media with false identities. They are often employed in huge numbers (especially by the Russians) to bombard the internet and appear to be local individuals when in fact they are paid to influence the electorate in another country than their own. The political purpose is to rile voters and divide the electorate into extreme opposing factions that loathe each other. Sockpuppets manipulate voters and spread highly damaging false information. In the case of Russia, Vladimir Putin’s purpose is to undermine democracy, particularly American democracy (Poole, 2018).

### Catfishing

Catfishing is creating a fraudulent online identity. From the 1970s through the 1990s Donald Trump assumed the false identity of John Barron, or John Miller to praise himself to New York City reporters (Fisher & Hobson, 2016). If Trump had used the internet rather than the telephone, he would have been catfishing.

### Astroturfing

Astroturfing is a powerful tool that lets senders of an online message hide their true identity and make it appear that the message is from grassroots sources. Astroturfing is meant to enhance the credibility of certain organizations by making them look popular among ordinary people.
“In recent years, sockpuppets, spambot armies and astroturfing have become valuable tools for governments all over the world to influence public opinion, stifle dissent, and spread misinformation” (Trewinnard, 2016, para. 7). The danger these technologies presented in undermining the 2016 American presidential election will be even greater in the 2020 election.

**Doxing**

Doxing began in the early 1990s as an internet means of giving out private information about a person in order to harass or intimidate them. Initially it was often used against women to frighten them. Political use of doxing has recently emerged to attack politicians and urge others to join in (Schneier, 2015).

Witnesses called to testify at Trump’s impeachment trial were attacked by Trump. Former White House national security official Fiona Hill testified that she is facing online harassment and doxxing amid the widely tweeted hearings (Frazen, 2019, para. 16).

**“Snowflake”**

“Snowflake” is a political insult typically used by conservatives. It is meant to suggest fragility while also being emasculating (Hess, 2017). Conservative men like to think of themselves as rugged macho Westerners compared to the feminized East Coast liberals. Lately, conservatives complaining of being treated unfairly are being labeled snowflakes by laughing liberals. “Today’s tough-guy posturing seems rooted paradoxically, in threat and fear: fear of defeat, fear of lost status and fear that society is growing increasingly ill-suited to tough guy posturing in the first place” (Hess, 2017, p. 13).

**Political Tropes**

Tropes are used in literature as a colloquial figure of speech, either a single word or a whole phrase that means something different from its literal meaning. Tropes can be demeaning such as referring to women as “chicks”, or awe-inspiring such as “fortress America.” Tropes are repeated frequently because they work by connecting to our experiences and/or emotions. “There is much more to tropes and schemes than surface considerations. Indeed, politicians and pundits use these language forms to create specific social and political effects by playing on our emotions” (Rhetorica, n.d., para. 1).

Tropes have taken on a new meaning in political communication because of the power of repetition. Donald Trump uses the word “other” as a trope by creating a world of us and them, where them is the “other” that he will protect us from them.
On July 14, 2019, Trump tweet-attacked four Democratic congressional representatives who are liberal women of color by using the well-worn trope of “go back”:

Trump’s latest words crossed a new line, sounding more clearly like something out of a white supremacist handbook demanding that people of color “go back” to their home countries. Never mind that three of the four women Trump attacked were born here. Never mind that their families may have been in the U.S. longer than Trump’s own family has. (Cardona, 2019, para. 13)

Although tropes are defined as non-literal terms, “go back” has become a functional trope by endless repetition against immigrants and African-Americans for generations in the United States. On July 19, 2019, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez worked a new twist on an old trope when she tweeted, “The GOP wants to send us back: Back towards injustice, Back to the denial of science, Back to the times when women needed permission slips from men, Back to racism - But we won’t go back. We will move forward” (Sharif, 2019, para. 12).

**Dog Whistle**

Dog whistles are coded language meant to be understood only by the targeted audience in the same way that a high frequency dog whistle can be heard by dogs but not people. Trump’s “birther” movement questioning Barack Obama’s country of birth seemed silly to many people but to Trump’s ardent followers it was a racist dog whistle telling them that Trump was fighting for white people against people of color (Scott, 2018). Dog whistles are based on racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and other stereotypes.

Following the impeachment of Donald Trump by the House of Representatives, Adam Schiff, the chair of the House Intelligence Committee was threatened by Trump.

Many presidents in history had dogs. This current one has a dog whistle. Americans witnessed it shown in a raging Sunday morning tweet about Adam Schiff, calling him a “corrupt politician” and probably a “very sick man” who has “not paid the price” for “what he has done” to our country (Israel, 2020, para. 1).

What Trump is dog whistling to those of his followers who are violent extremists, is that they should go after Adam Schiff. That is exactly what one of Trump’s extremist followers did in October, 2019 when he threatened to kill Schiff and was arrested and found to have two hand guns, a tactical rifle and 700 rounds of ammunition (Mordock, 2020). Given this history, it is clear the Trump knows exactly who he is whistling to and what tragedy might ensue.

The White House also tweeted a quote questioning the judgment and loyalty of Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, a National Security Council Ukraine specialist, during his public testimony …

The Army has taken steps to keep Vindman safe, an official told The Wall Street Journal. Officials told the paper the Army is ready to move him and his family onto a military base if they are in danger. (Frazen, 2019, para. 11, 15)
The dog whistle “loyalty” is a trigger for Trump extremists who value loyalty highly and are hostile toward disloyalty. Trump has made it abundantly clear that he expects absolute loyalty, even Medieval-style fealty, from everyone in the entire Washington administration (Parker, 2020). By questioning Lt. Col. Vindman’s loyalty, Trump is sending a very dangerous whistle to his followers and the Army knows it.

**Flying Monkeys**

Donald Trump is clearly an abusive narcissist who attacks and victimizes anyone who threatens him. Those who join in to support him and also attack the victim are called flying monkeys because they resemble the flying monkeys from the *Wizard of Oz* who carried out the evil intentions of the Wicked Witch of the West.

The epidemic of narcissism-enabling weakens the fabric of democracy, of community, of justice, and of healthy relationships. The toxic relational impacts of narcissism are being felt more and more, and even if you have somehow steered clear of any significant relationships with narcissists in your own life – you still see the news, scan the headlines online, and see social media posts. None of us are immune from being exposed to these toxic patterns.

When the flying monkeys are on Capitol Hill, the houses of Parliament, and corporate boardrooms, then all of us are at danger. It’s the proverbial fox in charge of the henhouse. Concepts such as checks and balances start to feel quaint. And an anxiety starts to creep into all of us, the anxiety that happens when leadership goes missing, and manipulation becomes the norm. (Durvasula, 2019, para. 6, 7)

**Post-Truth: Lies and Cognition**

In 2016, following the Trump and Brexit campaigns, the Oxford Dictionaries designated “post-truth” as the “word of the year” and defined it as, “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Lee McIntyre in his book *Post Truth* (2018) describes our current political situation as getting closer and closer to resembling George Orwell’s *1984*: “Truth is the first casualty in the establishment of the authoritarian state (p. 4).”

**Lies**

“Lies — especially repetitive lies — are a crucial part of how propaganda works. Truth is a basic part of a functioning democracy” (Sullivan, 2019a, para. 13). As of January 20, 2020, *The Washington Post* Fact Checker database indicates that
Trump’s “false or misleading claims” numbered 16,241 since taking office 3 years past (Kessler, Rizzo, & Kelly, 2020).

From April 26, 2019 to August 5, 2019 Trump’s lies increased to an average of 20 times a day (Einenkel, 2019). Some of Trump’s most repeated lies—meaning he’s repeated them well over 100 times—include:

- How Trump’s “wall” is being built bigger and faster “than ever.”
- How unemployment is the lowest ever for everyone.
- China has been stealing money from America.
- The investigation into Russia’s election meddling is a witch hunt with no merit.
- Democratic Party wants to open all the borders and flood our social services with Mexicans.
- He’s strengthened the military after years of “depletion.” (Einenkel, 2019)

Donald Trump seems incapable of not lying even about the simplest things, such as the country of his father’s birth. “My father is German — was German”, Trump said. “Born in a very wonderful place in Germany, so I have a great feeling for Germany.” (Blake, 2019, para. 3). Fred Trump was born in the Bronx! (Bump, 2019).

On December 18, 2019 Donald J. Trump, 45th president of the United States, was impeached by the House of Representatives of the United States Congress. The articles of impeachment were abuse of power and obstruction of Congress (Walters, 2020). In October and November of 2019, Trump told 2062 lies, mostly about the Ukraine investigation which formed the basis of the impeachment inquiry. Trump kept denying that he urged the president of Ukraine to announce that an investigation of a political rival (Joe Biden) was underway, despite clear evidence to the contrary (Kessler et al., 2020). Because of Republican dominance in the United States Senate and the complete intransigence of Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, only a single Republican senator, Mitt Romney, voted to impeach Donald Trump. Trump will stay, and his legacy of lies continue to haunt democracy.

The Big Lie

Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, was the author of the “Big Lie” that the Jews were responsible for all of Germany’s troubles, especially WWI and its aftermath of economic depression, and then WWII. The key to making the big lie work is endless repetition.

Regarding the Jewish question, the Fuehrer is determined to clean the table. He prophesized that should the Jews once again bring about a world war, they would be annihilated. These were no empty words. The world war has come, therefore the annihilation of the Jews has to be its inevitable consequence. The question has to be examined without any sentimentality. We are not here to pity Jews, but to have pity for our own German people. If the German people have sacrificed about 160,000 dead in the battles in the east, the instigators of this bloody conflict will have to pay for it with their lives. (Goebbels’ diaries, Part II, Volume 2, p. 498—entry for December 13, 1941, cited in Jewish Virtual Library, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/joseph-goebbels-on-the-jewish-question)
The big lie works so well because people tend to feel that no one could make up something so overwhelming. It has to be true precisely because it is so compelling.

From the pages of the New York Times to USA Today, the New Statesman to the New Yorker, a fear exists that the United States is about to fall under the spell of the Big Lie — a lie so big that it could disrupt the entire social order (Jacobson, 2018, para. 1).

The Republican National Convention in August 2020, relentlessly pursued the new Big Lie that Democrats are the party of chaos and anarchy (Skelley, 2020) while Republicans bring about safety and security through law and order. Trump is depicting the Democratic party as being anti police, and accused Joe Biden of supporting the “defunding” of police departments (Kessler, 2020). A massively funded Republican ad campaign has depicted the police as non-functional because of Democratic party sponsored defunding: “Joe Biden’s supporters are fighting to defund police departments. Violent crime has exploded. You won’t be safe in Joe Biden’s America” (Kessler, 2020, p. 1).

**Cumulative Little Lies**

Zachary Jacobson (2018) argues that it is not the Big Lie that people have to worry about but rather the toll the endless little lies are taking on our psychological well-being. American society is being buried under a Tsunami of daily lies coming from president Trump’s seemingly endless Tweets.

What we should fear today is not the Big Lie but the profusion of little ones: an untallied daily cocktail of lies prescribed not to convince of some higher singularity but to confuse, to distract, to muddy, to flood. Today’s falsehood strategy does not give us one idea to organize our thoughts, but thousands of conflicting lies to confuse them. (Jacobson, 2018, para. 2)

What is at risk in this endless onslaught of presidential lies is that truth no longer functions as the foundation for a common reality. “Facts and logic gradually become more and more attenuated, indistinguishable in a world so full of little lies” (Jacobson, 2018, para. 15). Under such conditions democracy itself is being progressively undermined.

**The Philosophical Theory of Bullshit**

Harry G. Frankfurt (2005), Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Princeton University, has written a pithy tome dedicated to creating a first theory of bullshit in modern culture. His theory is directly relevant to both politics and psychology in that it is based on a concern with truth. In an age of “alternative facts” (Wedge, 2017, para. 3) the very notion of truth is becoming destabilized. Frankfurt says that “… this lack of connection to a concern with truth---this indifference to how things really
are--that I regard as the essence of bullshit” (2005, pp. 33–34). In a philosophical sense, Donald Trump is not continuously lying but rather he is bullshitting.

According to Frankfurt, lying requires a complete knowledge of the truth so that the lie can be expertly crafted. Donald Trump does not operate from a substantial knowledge base and has only a passing relationship to the truth and therefore is typically bullshitting rather than lying.

The amazing thing about Frankfurt’s treatise is that it was written well before the 2016 presidential election, yet there are key observations that characterize Trump exactly. The bullshitter “… does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all” (2005, p. 61).

The bullshitter … is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man or of the liar, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describes reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 56).

Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus, the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic. (p. 63)

**Weaponized Lies**

Daniel Levitin (2016, p. xx) examines the cognitive consequence of living in a “post-truth era.”

We’ve created more human-made information in the past five years than in all of human history before them. Found along things that are true is an enormous number of things that are not, in websites, videos, books, and on social media, … The unique problem we face today is that misinformation has proliferated and lies can be weaponized to produce social and political ends we would otherwise be safeguarded against.

One of the reasons that lies can so easily delude many people is the lack of critical thinking and general lack of good education prevalent today. The ability to make good decisions based on reliable information has been badly undermined.

**Counterknowledge**

Levitin points out that it used to be easier to judge the authenticity of information. Books published by major companies and articles in respected newspapers or refereed journals looked authentic. For so many in the current era, information comes over the internet. “A crank website can look as authentic as an authoritative, fact-checked one” (Levitin, 2016, p. xix). So even if someone is trying to avoid confirmation bias by seeking out a wider array of information using the internet, the accuracy of that information may be hard to determine.
Counterknowledge is a term conceived by Damien Thompson (2008) to describe how misinformation is cleverly presented as fact and believed by millions of people such that society is now “facing a pandemic of credulous thinking” (p. 1). Vulnerability to misleading information has greatly increased because of the internet.

**Gaslighting**

Emotion is the key to gaslighting. In order to gain power over a person the gaslighter is able to undermine how reality is viewed. A person is made to question their own reality. “Feelings, not fact are essential to good gaslighting” (Carpenter, 2018, p. 167). Donald Trump was able to make outrageously false claims about the size of attendance at his inauguration. He insisted that he secured the popular vote in the election when (non-existent) voter fraud was factored into the count. He could do this because he had already undermined voter’s sense of reality with continuous very large lies throughout his campaign and before. Trump started his birther controversy lies about President Barack Obama back in 2011 (Tatem & Acosta, 2017). By ignoring truth, and evoking concepts like “alternative truths”, Trump has successfully gaslighted a sizeable segment of the American population.

Amanda Carpenter’s (2018) book on how Trump is gaslighting America, is not very optimistic about truth prevailing anytime soon. Even when Trump supporters see all the damage he has done, they don’t care. They are in thrall to him, completely under his control. He defines reality for them. Gaslighting is powerful beyond all reason because it is not based on reason.

Stephanie Sarkis, a clinical psychologist, has written a book on the psychology of gaslighting (Sarkis, 2018). In the title of an article in USA Today, Sarkis (2018) describes Donald Trump as a gaslighter who is in an “abusive relationship with America.” The point of gaslighting is to gain control over another person. Trump is successfully gaining control over the very notion of truth in America, where lies have become “alternative facts”.

**Alternative Facts**

The term “alternative facts” was created by Trump senior advisor, Kellyanne Conway to defend White House press secretary Sean Spicer’s lie about the size of the crowd attending Trump’s inauguration. Marilyn Wedge (2017) noted that the origin of the notion of alternative facts lies with George Orwell’s 1984. In the totalitarian state which Orwell envisioned, language was changed to support simple positive concepts. Bad was changed to “ungood”. “In the current “Newspeak” that Ms. Conway called “alternative facts” on Sunday, falsehoods lose their negative connotation and become facts—albeit alternative facts. The new administration’s efforts at mind control begins.” (Wedge, 2017, The origins in “Newspeak”, para. 1).
Lee McIntyre, in his book *Post Truth* (2018), describes our current political situation as getting closer and closer to resembling George Orwell’s *1984*: “Truth is the first casualty in the establishment of the authoritarian state (p. 4).” This scenario is right out of Adolph Hitler’s *My new order* (1941) which Trump’s first wife, Ivana, reported was by Trump’s bedside (Flood, 2016). A friend corroborated that he gave Trump the book. Considering that Trump almost never reads anything, it is truly horrifying that he would make the effort to read a book on how to assert authoritarian control over a people and a country. “This is not a simple fear of the truth; it is a weaponizing of untruth. It is the use of the lie to assault and subdue. It is Trump doing to political ends what Hitler did to more brutal ends: using mass deception as masterful propaganda.” (Blow, 2017).

**Escape from Freedom**

In 1941, *Escape from Freedom* was published. In this extraordinary book, the German Jewish psychoanalyst and social psychologist, Erich Fromm, seeks to explain how authoritarianism was supported over democracy by the people of Germany. This topic is painfully relevant today with autocrats exerting control over countries as diverse as the United States, Russia, China, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, Venezuela, the Philippines, Israel, and most recently, with the election of Boris Johnson, Great Britain.

“What is it that creates in men an insatiable lust for power? Is it the strength of their vital energy – or is it a fundamental weakness and inability to experience life spontaneously and lovingly?” (Fromm, 1941, p. 21). Fromm emphasized the role of psychological factors in trying to understand the allure of fascism in 1930s Europe (Mussolini in Italy, Franco in Spain, Salazar in Portugal, Dollfuss in Austria, Hitler in Germany). “For we are dealing with a political system which, essentially, does not appeal to rational forces of self-interest, but which arouses and mobilizes diabolical forces in man which we had believed to be nonexistent, or at least to have died out long ago.” (Fromm, 1941, p. 21). What Fromm observed from the political takeover by the Nazi party in Germany made him try to understand how humankind could go from a society based on reason to a horrendous descent into the most primal forces of hatred, unbridled aggression, and pure evil.

**Freedom, Belonging, and Overstimulation**

Fromm examined the reasons why so many humans are willing to trade their freedom for authoritarian political frameworks. He concluded that freedom brings with it a sense of loneliness, of being separated from the group by the pressure to exert one’s individual choices. American social psychologists, Leon Festinger (1957) and Philip Zimbardo (1969) have noted that making individual choices is hard because
you have to live with the consequences of your choices and that can produce cognitive dissonance. Dissonance is deeply disturbing and disruptive to the individual. If you simply go along with what your group advocates, then you don’t feel personal responsibility or the extreme discomfort of cognitive dissonance if the choice is a bad one. In the “Nazi” experiment, students indicated that they went along with giving supposedly dangerous (and perhaps lethal) electric shocks to another student because they were told by an authority figure (professor in a lab coat) that other students had followed instructions (Milgram, 1963). Obedience and social conformity are factors that reduce an individual’s sense of responsibility.

**Self-Interest and Voting**

Erich Fromm (1941) was greatly troubled by the lack of reasoned self-interest in the German adoption of Nazism. In twenty-first century politics the question is often asked: Why do people vote against their own self-interest? Alvin Toffler (1970) argues that rational behavior depends on being able to successfully process the continuous flow of information from the environment. Information overload (Levitin, 2014) and decisional stress make the individual shut down. Future shock is the response to overstimulation. “For the uncontrolled acceleration of scientific, technological, and social change subverts the power of the individual to make sensible, competent decisions about his own destiny” (Toffler, 1970, p. 358).

**The Holocaust Mentality: How It Begins**

**Othering and the Holocaust**

Comparisons between Trump and Hitler have focused on the way “Trump drums up support by blaming and denigrating groups who do not fit the imagination of a masculine, Christian, hard-working, and essentially white American ideal-type: Mexicans, Muslims, gay and transgender people, and disabled people, to name a few of the most obvious targets.” (Umbach, 2016).

“When societies experience big and rapid change, a frequent response is for people to narrowly define who qualifies as a full member of society” (Powell, 2017, para. 3). This is the beginning of the process of “Othering”. Law professor, John A. Powell (director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society) warns that the Othering of minority groups has been taken on by the mainstream of conservatism. “Conservative elites know how to strategically create and use fear of a perceived Other, by organising and manufacturing fear” (Powell, 2017, Exclusion and dehumanization, para. 4). “The rhetoric and language coming from Trump has begun to both define and normalise Othering. This is a threat to all the things we value” (Powell, 2017, para. 8). This is how the Holocaust mentality begins.
First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out —.
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out —.
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out —.
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me. (Marcuse, 2016, p. 173)

The quotation is attributed to Martin Niemöller, a Lutheran pastor who was an enthusiastic supporter of Adolph Hitler early in the Nazi takeover of Germany. Niemöller was a politically conservative naval officer in WWI and voted Nazi from 1924 on. He was very proud to be German. He got into trouble by questioning Nazi policy on church doctrine and was ultimately sent to Dachau concentration camp which he survived (Marcuse, 2016). Essentially, Niemöller was completely engaged in the Othering process, the opposite of the belonging and bridging dynamic (Powell, 2017) that connects all people.

**Blaming**

Totalitarian regimes utilize blaming as a standard tactic to direct attention away from the weaknesses of the regime onto scapegoats. The 2020 pandemic of the COVID-19 coronavirus set the stage for taking attention away from the total incompetence of the Trump administration’s response to the pending disease invasion by calling it the “China virus”. “The United States blew its window of opportunity to prepare for the pandemic that is now about to happen” (Drezner, 2020, para. 7). Instead of acknowledging the danger presented by COVID-19, Trump distanced the problem by labeling it a Chinese problem. As a result, Americans of Asian descent are being harassed, tormented, and physically assaulted (Buncombe, 2020), especially by the people most influenced by Donald Trump.

Today, by referring to covid-19 as a “Chinese” disease, Trump appears to be blaming the disease and its transmission on people with Chinese and East Asian ancestry. When that attitude comes from the presidential bully pulpit, it easily spreads. For instance, a Kansas county commissioner claimed his county didn’t need stringent public health measures because it had so few Chinese people, making it safe. Such rhetoric mistakenly suggests China and Chinese people are medically or pathologically diseased (White & King, 2020, Calling it a ‘Chinese virus’, para. 1).

**How Democracies Are Lost**

Historian of the Holocaust, Christopher Browning (2018, para. 5) has compared events in the last decade in the US to the decade before Hitler took power during the Weimar republic in Germany:
A second aspect of the interwar period with all too many similarities to our current situation is the waning of the Weimar Republic. Paul von Hindenburg, elected president of Germany in 1925, was endowed by the Weimar Constitution with various emergency powers to defend German democracy should it be in dire peril. Instead of defending it, Hindenburg became its gravedigger, using these powers first to destroy democratic norms and then to ally with the Nazis to replace parliamentary government with authoritarian rule.

Hitler was made chancellor by von Hindenburg along with the ruling conservatives who thought that they could control him. The conservatives were happy about Hitler’s success in suspending freedom of speech and the press and they were especially pleased with his destruction of the unions.

In 1925 Germany, my 17 year-old Jewish mother, then Selma Joseph, posted signs during the Weimar Republic saying, “If you elect von Hindenburg you elect Hitler.” She saw the whole thing coming and joined the Underground Resistance once von Hindenburg handed over the German government to Hitler as she had predicted he would do. My mother took many refugees across the border to Czechoslovakia on skis. She would then return to Germany by train (She didn’t even know how to ski very well). One time an SS officer helped her with her luggage, terrifying her greatly.

When I was very young strangers would come to our little apartment in Queens, NY and thank her for saving their lives. By sheer chance when the Nazi SS found, tortured and murdered her Resistance group she escaped and left Germany the next day with only her clothes, passport, and very little money. Given my heritage, I take the current threat to American democracy very seriously; the reason is not only Donald Trump but Mitch McConnell and the Republican party.

**Democracy, McConnell and the Republican Party**

If the US has someone whom historians will look back on as the gravedigger of American democracy, it is Mitch McConnell. He stoked the hyperpolarization of American politics to make the Obama presidency as dysfunctional and paralyzed as he possibly could. As with parliamentary gridlock in Weimar, congressional gridlock in the US has diminished respect for democratic norms, allowing McConnell to trample them even more. Nowhere is this vicious circle clearer than in the obliteration of traditional precedents concerning judicial appointments. Systematic obstruction of nominations in Obama’s first term provoked Democrats to scrap the filibuster for all but Supreme Court nominations. Then McConnell’s unprecedented blocking of the Merrick Garland nomination required him in turn to scrap the filibuster for Supreme Court nominations in order to complete the “steal” of Antonin Scalia’s seat and confirm Neil Gorsuch (Browning, 2018, para. 7).

The Republican party has been almost uniformly complicit in Trump and McConnell’s anti-democracy agenda. Voting rights have been curtailed across the country to depress that part of the electorate most likely to vote Democratic (Rubin, 2019; Ross, 2020). Republicans in Congress have failed to denounce even the most
extreme proclamations and lies from Trump. Despite strong evidence that Trump engaged in abuse of power, the Republican Senate, under McConnell’s absolute control, refused to even call witnesses to hear detailed evidence of Trump’s violation of the Constitution. Instead the Senate acquitted Trump in his so-called impeachment trial (Baker, 2020). Trump went on to fire key witnesses, Ambassador Sondland and Lt. Col. Vindman, who had testified against him in the House of Representatives (Baker, Haberman, Hakim, & Schmidt, 2020).

**Republican Conservatives Critical of Trump**

Charles Sykes (2017), a former conservative radio commentator, describes how American conservatives were seduced into a new culture of intimidation, acting as trolls and flying monkeys on behalf of Donald Trump. He details how paranoia, bigotry, post-truth politics, conspiracy theories, nativism, authoritarianism, “the outrage machine”, and the “alt-reality media” such as Fox News and Breitbart normalized emotion driven Trump subservience. Sykes calls his book *How the Right Lost its Mind*.

Ironically, those disaffected Republican conservatives who have chosen to write about Donald Trump have done so in extremely derogatory terms. Rick Wilson (2018) titled his book: *Everything Trump Touches Dies: A Republican Strategist Gets Real About the Worst President Ever.* Amanda Carpenter (2018), Michael Wolff (2018), and Wilson decry the tyranny and chaos that Trump has brought to America and the willingness of the Republican party leadership to go along with it. Unfortunately, none of this has had the least effect on Mitch McConnell and other Republicans in government.

**Republicans Undermining Election Security**

One of the most powerful ways of destroying democracy is to undermine the security of elections. Republicans under Mitch McConnell have repeatedly blocked new election security measures to counter Russian interference in the 2020 election as they did in the 2016 election (Barnes, 2020; Carney, 2020; Marks, 2019). Ironically, in this high-tech age, paper ballots offer the strongest security against cyberattacks, but McConnell and the Republicans in the Senate won’t support them (Sandoval, 2019).

Republicans have adopted the “win at all costs” strategy that has opened the door to the kind of dynamics that lead to the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. When power is more important than democracy no horror is too great to contemplate.

**My New Order: Hitler’s Speeches**

People have certificates; he doesn’t have a birth certificate,” Trump said to Bill O’Reilly, then of Fox News Channel, in April 2011.
Now, he may have one, but there’s something on that birth. … maybe religion, maybe it says he’s a Muslim. I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t want that. Or he may not have one, but I will tell you this: If he wasn’t born in this country, it’s one of the great scams of real time.” (Bump, 2019).

The cadence of this speech, and using may, maybe, or may not in an alliterative pattern is right out of My New Order. The owner of Ishi Press, Sam Sloane has added an introduction to the copy of Hitler’s My New Order published by his company (Hitler, 1941/2016, p. i):

There are clear similarities between the speeches of Trump and the speeches of Hitler. Here are examples: They repeat themselves constantly, saying the same things over and over again. They never admit they have made a mistake, nor do they ever take anything back. To any criticism, they respond by insults and name calling. They use a low form of language, with simple sentences even a person with the lowest level of education or with no education at all can understand. Studies have shown that Trump speaks at a fourth grade reading level. Most of the words he uses are only one syllable long.

The original 1941 editor and translator of My New Order, Raoul de Roussy de Sales, commented that “Hitler’s speeches are no model of oratory. His German is sloppy and full of grammatical errors. … the substance of his speeches is usually confused and repetitious” (Hitler, 1941/2016, p. 5). Sound familiar?

**Trump’s Pattern of Lying Identical to Adolph Hitler’s**

Sam Sloan (2016) points out in his introduction that Hitler contradicted himself continuously and used lies as part of his signature delivery. Among his almost continuous lies, Donald Trump directs hatred toward four Democratic congressional representatives who are Muslim and/or women of color. Speaking of Rashida Tlaib (MI), Ilhan Omar (MN), Ayanna Pressley (MA), and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY), Trump asked “why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came?” (Sonmez & DeBonis, 2019, para. 1). Three were born in the United States. Trump claimed that New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez “called our country and our people garbage” (PolitiFact National on Tuesday, July 23rd, 2019). Trump accused congressional Representative Ilhan Omar, Democrat of Minnesota of “speaking about how wonderful al-Qaida is.” (PolitiFact National on Tuesday, July 16th, 2019). Trump also claimed, “that when his supporters chanted “send her back” about Ilhan Omar, he stopped it” (PolitiFact National on Friday, July 19th, 2019). Trump did nothing to reign in the vicious chanting about Representative Omar who was born in Somalia and came to the United States as a child.

**Authoritarian Adoration**

Just like Hitler, Trump only really comes alive before huge crowds of his supporters. His energy feeds off his fan base. Rallies are vital to his self-esteem. “The leader-follower relationship is the core of authoritarian regimes—and rallies are its distillation” (Ben-Ghiat, 2019, para. 4).
The Social Trance

Kenneth Adams (2019, p. 238) argues that “Donald Trump’s tenure as president is dependent on his followers’ immersion in a social trance that inhibits recognition and rational appraisal of his likely collusion with Russia in the 2016 election and his unparalleled malfeasance.” The source of this social trance begins with a traumatic childhood of forced obedience to authority. Adams (2019, p. 238) goes on to suggest that “right wing GOPers and Christian fundamentalists were already functioning in a trance state prior to Trump’s arrival on the political scene.” Trump is brilliant at exploiting this situation with his own trance induction presentations. As with Hitler, Trump’s speech cadences, constant lying, and repetition mesmerize his listeners. They fill in missing parts of his fractious sentences with whatever they want to hear (Adams, 2019).

Fascism

While it is hard to imagine American democracy succumbing to fascism, the groundwork for such a devastating and cataclysmic decline exists and has been put into place over a long period of time. Madeline Albright (2018) fled fascism in Europe, as a child. Her perspective as a former American Secretary of State combined with her personal experience allows an unusual understanding of fascism in geopolitics. Albright sees Donald Trump as being closer to Benito Mussolini than Adolf Hitler. Mussolini uttered the exhortation: “drenare la palude,” which means “drain the swamp.” His histrionic theatrics, while addressing the crowds from his marble balcony, are obvious to anyone viewing newsreels of the time. Mussolini loved to hear himself talk but rarely listened to others, and actively disliked being in situations where he had to pay attention to official briefings. His cabinet had to agree with him and not propose any idea that might disconcert him. This sounds exactly like a description of Donald Trump (Wilson, 2018; Wolff, 2018).

Unlike Hitler for whom Nazism suffused his entire being, Mussolini did not espouse a specific ideology. Instead he was a nativist populist (Albright, 2018), as is Trump. Donald Trump is not a fascist simply because he has no real ideology. Trump’s only ideology is Trump. He is a pure narcissist (Lancer, 2018; Lee, 2017; Mattison, 2016). Trump needs his rallies to maintain his cult of personality. Psychologically, Trump desperately needs the adulation of crowds (Dwyer, 2019), and makes frequent and unnecessary campaign rallies to get his fix.

Malignant Narcissism

Erich Fromm (1941) described Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin as suffering from the mental illness of malignant narcissism, a term which Fromm created to describe the behavior he saw in them. According to psychoanalyst, Otto Kernberg (1989),
malignant narcissism encompasses three traits beyond simple narcissism: paranoia, antisocial personality disorder, and sadism. Paranoia involves delusions of persecution but also a sense of one’s own tremendous importance. Antisocial personality disorder is associated with criminals and endless lies. Sadism is about experiencing pleasure from causing others suffering, pain and/or humiliation. Numerous mental health specialists have made the case that Donald Trump has all the behavioral and emotional indicators of being a malicious narcissist (Buser & Cruz, 2017; Garau, 2017; Gartner, 2017; Lancer, 2018; Lee, 2017).

To compensate for insecurity and shame, narcissists feel superior, often expressed with disdain or contempt. Arrogance and putdowns bolster their egos by projecting the devalued parts of themselves onto others. Trump has disparagingly and publicly labeled various people a “dog,” “bimbo,” “dummy,” “grotesque,” “losers,” or “morons.” Narcissists’ invectives are made worse by their lack of empathy, which enables them to see people as two-dimensional objects to meet their needs. (Lancer, 2018, para. 11)

Trump’s hero, Vladimir Putin, “is a poorly educated, under-informed, incurious man whose ambition is vastly out of proportion to his understanding of the world. … it is the spectacle of power that interests him” (Gessen, 2017, para. 5). The same can be said of Trump. Neither of them is competent to deal with complexity so everything is reduced to power. On some level they are aware of their inadequacies, and compensate with cruelty, always demeaning those better equipped to govern.

Trump biographer, Michael D’Antonio (2016), concludes that the essence of Donald Trump is a mixture of cruelty, fear and even violence. His bombastic style enhances these elements. His analysis of the quality and worth of something is “entirely self-referential” (D’Antonio, 2016, p. 323). If Trump wins, he is flattered at his success, therefore the news coverage, meeting, or endeavor is deemed to be good. Things don’t have merit on their own, only as they relate to Trump. “Americans too have grown familiar with the sight of a president who seems to think that politics consists of demonstrating that he is in charge” (Gessen, 2017).

Despite a clear record of profound incompetence regarding the COVID-19 threat (Drezner, 2020; Jurecic & Wittes, 2020; Sarkis, 2020), Trump continues to feed his narcissism with his usual litany of lies. “I’ve gotten great marks on what we’ve done with respect to this,” Trump said. “I’ve gotten great marks. And even from almost every Democrat governor, so I’ve gotten great marks also. But we want to always make sure that we have a great president, that we have somebody that’s capable.” (Parker, Dawsey, & Abutaleb, 2020, para. 8)

The Atlantic magazine has compiled a complete listing of all of Trump’s lies about COVID-19 (Paz, 2020). The listing is open and will be continuously updated to keep pace with Trump’s endless lies.

**Trump’s Authoritarianism**

Authoritarianism is based on the leader-follower relationship. Inciting a mob to violence is the essence of dictatorial power. Trump has advocated violence against journalists, opponents, ordinary citizens, judges, politicians and others. “This was the method of Hitler and Mussolini, which Sinclair Lewis translated into the
American setting for his novel *It Can’t Happen Here* (Posner, 2018, p. 15). Now Cass Sunstein (2018) is asking *Can It Happen Here?* In the age of technology Trump can effortlessly escalate this pattern of intimidation. Internet harassment by Trump followers, especially the far-right extremists, can threaten physical harm and do great psychological harm to the targets of these assaults. The increase in violence by white supremacists has been notable since Trump took office (Levin, 2019).

Rick Wilson attacks Donald Trump as a devastatingly bad president, but as a Republican strategist he helped create the anti-democratic dynamic of mob incitement. “We knew they were out there, and we identified them, targeted them, and motivated them” (Wilson, 2018, p. 106). Republican strategists simply did not appreciate what they were unleashing. According to Wilson the people they were encouraging were really, just waiting for a “strongman” to take over and solve all their problems. “Then there is the problem of a Commander in Chief whose rhetoric appears to mirror, validate and potentially inspire that of far-right extremists” (Bergengruen & Hennigan, 2019, p. 23). In defense of that strongman with whom they identified closely, Trump’s extremist followers broke the bounds of democratic society and became a fascist-style intimidation force stifling dissent and openly attacking enemies.

Trump’s speeches, studded with such absolutist terms as “losers” and “complete disasters,” are classic authoritarian statements. His clear distinction between groups on top of society (Whites) and those “losers” and “bad Hombres” on the bottom (immigrants, Blacks and Latinos) are classic social dominance statements. (Pettigrew, 2017, p. 108)

**The Real Terrorist Threat to America**

In 2019 America the greatest terrorist threat is domestic, from the alt-right and other white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups (Forgey, 2019). Disastrously, little is being done to counter domestic terrorism. George Selim who headed counterterrorism agencies in both the G. W. Bush and Obama eras is greatly alarmed that under the Trump administration endeavors to cope with domestic terrorism “came to a grinding halt” (Bergengruen & Hennigan, 2019, p. 26).

“Since Sept. 11, far-right terrorists have killed 110 people on American soil, while jihadists have killed 107” (Rose & Soufan, 2020, p. A27). Domestic terrorism is a misnomer. Right-wing authoritarian groups are internationally connected and receive help and information from one-another. Because American law does not cover American white supremacist groups under the “foreign terrorist” designation, American law enforcement cannot use its most effective tools to combat them. One issue is that they cannot share and receive intelligence internationally, as they can with jihadists. This cripples American law enforcement in dangerous ways.

Resistance to fighting domestic terrorism comes from those Republicans who perceive that conservatism will be lumped together with far-right extremism since they share so many over-lapping traits with violent authoritarians, such as threat sensitivity, death anxiety, dogmatism-intolerance of ambiguity, and a high need for
order and structure (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). The FBI Agents Association which met on August 21, 2019, issued a demand to legislators to make domestic terrorism a federal crime. Currently it can only be investigated as a “hate-crime” which greatly limits investigators and prosecutors (Forgey, 2019). Democrats have gone on record as giving complete support to the needs of the FBI and law enforcement generally, to have every possible tool in the fight against domestic terrorism. Most Republicans and especially, Mitch McConnell, are blocking that support just as they are blocking election security reform (Carney, 2020; Chapman, 2019; Sandoval, 2019).

**Fear**

Trump’s signature operating style is the promulgation of fear toward all those who surround him. He “rules” by fear (Wilson, 2018; Wolff, 2018). As a businessman with six bankruptcies in his history, Trump couldn’t care less; his power is undiminished because people are still afraid of him (Woodward, 2018). He uses fear as the basis of his diplomacy, almost causing a (perhaps nuclear) war with North Korea in early 2018. Trump’s plan had been to intimidate and “outfox” Kim Jung Un by threatening nuclear war (Woodward, 2018).

Trump gave this advice to a friend who had behaved badly toward women: “Real power is fear. It’s all about strength. Never show weakness. You’ve got to be strong. You’ve got to be aggressive. … You’ve got to push back hard.” (Woodward, 2018, p. 175).

Trump enjoys generating fear among his followers. Fear comes so naturally to him, as a life dynamic that he can speak of it from his innermost being, displaying great sincerity.

And no President has weaponized fear quite like Trump. He is an expert at playing to the public’s phobias. The America rendered in his speeches and tweets is a dystopian hellscape. He shapes public opinion by emphasizing dangers—both real and imaginary—that his policies purport to fix. (Altman, 2017, para. 7)

Conservatives tend to be easily threatened and authoritarians are even more susceptible (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009). Conservatives experience an existential need to minimize threat. Jost et al. (2003, p. 369) “regard political conservatism as an ideological belief system that is significantly (but not completely) related to motivational concerns having to do with the psychological management of uncertainty and fear.”

Making his followers feel fearful by expounding on the immediacy of threat to their well-being, allows Trump to manipulate people very successfully. Trump was particularly skilled at presenting immigrants to the United States as a security threat. People who believed him were much more likely to vote for him than people who perceived immigrants as economic or cultural threats (Wright & Esses, 2018). Security is such a big issue that if the sense of threat is large and immediate enough even non-conservatives can be moved to a more conservative position (Jost, Stern, Rule, & Sterling, 2017).
Meta-Violence

Instilling fear can only work if anger and violence result from the sense of threat. Trump regularly generates anger in his followers and praises violence. It is anger which motivates authoritarians.

Beyond directly instilling anger and advocating violence, Trump has created what Samira Saramo (2017) has termed a culture of “meta-violence” characterized by emotional extremes, deep social hostile divisions, and international antagonism and tension.

The meta-violent culture of the Trumpist social movement appears in its ideas, rhetoric, and science, dividing the United States into “Americans” and others, upholding Christianity above other religions, dictating control over women’s bodies, and thwarting efforts to protect and nurture the environment. In this way, meta-violence fuels the populism and popular culture of Trumpism. (Saramo, 2017, Feeling violence, para. 1)

Gamergate Political Intimidation

There is a huge worldwide gamer culture based on video and computer games. This is predominantly a male culture which has a dangerous underbelly of “angry men, trolls, racists and misogynists who hover around the video game industry” (Campbell, 2018, para. 1). “Gamergate” refers to an event that occurred in 2014 when an ex-boyfriend’s online attack against his ex-girlfriend turned into a horrific mass online attack on the woman by abusive male gamers, using gamer websites like 4chan and Reddit to inform their assaults. Now the term, Gamergate has come to define “a leaderless harassment campaign meant to preserve white male internet culture, disguised as a referendum on journalism ethics and political correctness” (Warzel, 2019, p. SR6). The culture war against feminism, racial equality, and political correctness did not start with Gamergate but it was supercharged and made visible by the horrific response to the original manic rant of the rejected boyfriend.

Gamergate wasn’t the birth of a brand-new culture war, it was a rallying cry. And its trollish successes in intimidating women, deceiving clueless brands, and picking up mainstream coverage taught a once dormant subculture powerful lessons about manipulating audiences and manufacturing outrage. (Warzel, 2019, p. SR7)

Gamergate was made for tyrants to exploit. The first was Steve Bannon, chair-man of Breitbart (Green, 2018), followed closely by other right-wing political media personalities. Trump now has a ready-made online mob to viciously attack anyone who he Tweets complainingly about. Gamergate is an authoritarian’s dream come true. The gamer websites 4chan and Reddit have been hijacked by the hate-filled netherworld of gaming and respond to Trump’s Tweets with a regularity that appears almost automatic.
The Toxic Allure of Trump

The key to Trump is his aura of strength. He makes every effort to dominate, using rudeness, threats, intimidation, and incitement to aggression regularly. He presents himself as strong enough to protect his followers. His promises are wildly unrealistic, but he declares them with such authority that his followers are reassured by the feelings of safety he generates with his bluster and pugnacity. His followers feel that he is fighting for them and that is all that matters.

In 2005, Jean Lipman-Blumen cautioned that “toxic leaders” can attract us because they appear able to fulfill our basic human needs: “the yearning for certainty in an uncertain world, for self-esteem, heroism, access to centers of action, opportunities to engage in noble enterprises, and the promise of immortality” (p. x). A critical human need is security and humans have a long history of trading freedom for the security offered by an authoritarian leader, no matter how toxic.

Civilization began with the decision to give up any freedom in order to have the security of a well-regulated economy under a king. Time and again throughout history people have chosen the perceived benefits of security over the awesome responsibilities of freedom. (Fears, 2007, History of freedom section, para. 19)

“Fascist politics invokes a pure mythic past tragically destroyed. … the mythic past may be religiously pure, racially pure, culturally pure, or all of the above” (Stanley, 2018, p. 3). Trump’s trademark “Make America Great Again” covers all of these mythic anchors. Nostalgia for a better past is one of the warning signs of maladaptation to rapid social change (Toffler, 1970). Trump represents the ultimate backlash against the rapid social change which brought the acceptance and incorporation of diversity into the mainstream of American life. His racist and sexist credentials cheer his followers who are not ready to give up the mythic past of a Christian, white, upwardly mobile America.

Anti-Semitism and Political History

Jews have been vulnerable throughout history; this is what sets Jews aside from all other oppressed groups (Gillman & Katz, 1993). Scapegoating Jews has proven to be successful political policy from ancient times to pre-WWII Germany and beyond. Hannah Arendt (1951) detailed the relationship between the rise of totalitarianism and the nurturing and exploiting of anti-Semitism as a highly effective political tool.

Karen Brodkin (1998) wrote a history of Jews in America titled How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America. More recently, Emma Green (2016) asks “Are Jews White?” The question really is, are Jews still white? Obviously, whiteness is not about genetics but instead about the social/cultural perception of being mainstream, belonging, fitting in. Losing their whiteness is about Jews again being seen as the outsider, ready to be targeted again.
Discrimination Against Jews

There was a time in twentieth century America where signs saying “no Jews or dogs allowed” were not uncommon. Entrance to certain hotels, resorts and country clubs were routinely denied based on a “Gentleman’s Agreement”. Choice residential areas were “restricted”, off-limits to Jews. Many areas of employment were closed to Jews, one of these was banking, giving the lie to the stereotype of the Jewish banker (Higham, 1957; Stember, 1966).

In 1959, I planned to apply for a summer job at the Bell telephone company, but I was told by a friend not to bother as Jews were never hired. In 1962, when I was a language major in college and planned to work for the State Department, I was gently informed by a friend’s father that Jews were not welcome in the State Department of the United States of America. After studying French, Spanish, German, and Hebrew I changed my major to biopsychology and planned to teach and do research, which I did. Everyone knew that Jews were welcome as teachers.

Jews and Whiteness

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Discrimination against Jews steadily declined over the latter part of the twentieth century. The Civil Rights laws of the mid 1960s and the birth of the women’s movement in the early 1970s began a process of social change with wide-ranging consequences for greater inclusion of diversity in American culture.

In essence, Jews became “white” in the modern American sense of the word. They had access to the levers of political power and no longer faced institutional discrimination like restrictions on housing. The election of Donald Trump as President has caused American Jews to rethink their place in American society, and has thrown their story of ascent into the mainstream into chaos. … While it is impossible to speculate, historians in the future may one day be asking, “When did Jews lose their whiteness?” (Morganson, 2017, para. 2, 4)

Political Tensions

Because of their history of oppression, Jews tend to fight for social justice and to be politically liberal. Recently, political tensions have arisen within the Democratic party over Israel and the Palestinian situation. First-term Congressional Representative Ilhan Omar used standard anti-Semitic tropes regarding Jews and money, as well as Jews and dual loyalty, in her Tweets about American Jewish
support for Israel (DeBonis & Bade, 2019). It is essential to American democracy that diversity of perspectives and heritage be supported and applauded. However, while Representative Omar has the freedom to support Palestinian and Muslim rights, it is vital that it not come at the cost of fostering stereotypes which can engender violence against others. She readily recognized this, and apologized. Nevertheless, James Clyburn, the third highest ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives defended Congresswoman Omar, saying that the Holocaust was a long time ago and Omar’s experience (she is both a refugee and an immigrant from Somalia) was more recent and therefore more relevant (Douthat, 2019).

Recent horrific anti-Semitic attacks against synagogues, Jewish institutions, and individuals make Clyburn’s remarks especially short-sighted and cruel (Anti-Defamation League Press Release, 2019; Fattal, 2018; Gillman & Katz, 1993; Lipstadt, 2019; Stephens, 2019). Referring to the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Philadelphia, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg (2018, para. 4) reminds us that:

this slaughter lives in the context of more than a thousand years of scapegoating Jews for the stresses and trials of society. The trope of the powerful Jew (which itself was born out of Christian oppression) has been deployed time and time again throughout history.

In America, Jews are often perceived as a minority that is “too successful” (Chua, 2018, p. 188). Since Jews tend to be liberal, they are a perfect target for conservatives tending toward extremism who already deeply despise liberals. White supremacists most definitely do not see Jews as “white”.

**Scapegoats and Social Change**

Rapid social change produces anxiety for many people and Jews are an always available scapegoat when people are searching for a reason why things are getting out of control. Jews are also handy when economic instability devastates people and they want to know who is at fault (Gillman & Katz, 1993). A rise in documented anti-Semitism occurred after the financial trauma of 2008 (Stoll, 2009). Stefanie Schuler-Springorum (cited in Kingsley, 2019, p. A8), the director of the Center for Anti-Semitism research in Berlin, Germany stated that “globalization and especially the crisis of 2008 have strengthened a feeling of being at the mercy of mechanisms that we do not understand, let alone control. … From there it is only a small step to classical conspiracy theories, which have always formed the core of anti-Semitism.”

After the second World War anti-Semitism was relegated to fringe politics. In the twenty-first century this has changed and now anti-Semitism is serving political goals. “Today mainstream European and North American politicians, even presidents, premiers, and prime ministers, don’t hesitate to flirt with or embrace overtly anti-Semitic messages and memes” (David Nirenberg, dean of the Divinity School and Jewish historian, at the University of Chicago, cited in Kingsley, 2019, p. A8).
Tremendous Rise in Anti-Semitic Incidents

Recently in New York City, a poster of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was defaced with a swastika and an anti-Semitic insult (Gold, 2019, March 15). New York City statistics for January 1, 2019 to March 10, 2019, indicate “an increase in hate crimes of 62% over the same time period last year” (Gold, 2019, p. A27).

Europe has recently experienced a significant increase in anti-Semitic acts, including murder. Political extremism of the neo-fascist far right is visible everywhere in Europe. In 2018 anti-Semitic acts in France increased by 74% and in Germany by 20%. A New York Times editorial (2019, May 27, p. A18) summarized this rising anti-Semitism:

After polling more than 16,000 Jews in 12 European countries at the end of last year, the European Union’s Agency for Fundamental Rights concluded that anti-Semitic hate speech, harassment and fear of being recognized as Jews were becoming the new normal. Eighty-five percent of the respondents thought anti-Semitism was the biggest social and political problem in their countries; almost a third said they avoided Jewish events or sites because of safety concerns. More than a third said they had considered emigrating in the five years preceding the survey.

The number of attacks on American synagogues has doubled in a single year, from 2017 to 2018 (Anti-Defamation League Press Release, 2019). There were 1879 reported anti-Semitic incidents in the United States overall in that 1-year period. Referring to the rise in anti-Semitic acts in both Europe and the United States a New York Times editorial (Anti-Defamation League Press Release, 2019, May 27, p. A18) cautioned that.

a tally of incidents does not tell the full story. To a degree, the numbers reflect the way hate speech, intolerance, anger and once-taboo themes have found their way into the open on social media or via populist movements, allowing hatred of Jews to come out of the shadows.

Most unfortunately, Islamic anti-Israel positions have often been expressed as open hostility and even aggression toward Jews in both Europe and the United States (Jikeli, 2015; Nossiter, 2018)

Trump Fosters Anti-Semitism

President Trump himself embodies the contradictions of the moment. Mr. Trump has openly courted white nationalists, saying they include “some very fine people,” even as they marched in the style of the Ku Klux Klan, gave stiff-armed Nazi salutes and chanted slogans like “Jews will not replace us.” (Kingsley, 2019, A8)

Trump is much more interested in courting ultra-right-wing anti-Semitic extremists than he is in protecting Jews, despite the fact that his daughter and son-in-law are Jewish. To Trump it’s just political expediency. Since he has no espoused principles other than his own welfare, Trump has no problem with sending out anti-Semitic dog whistles like “shifty Shiff”.

J. S. Rabin
This utilizes the well-worn trope of Jews being tricky, deceitful, and devious. Adam Schiff, chair of the House Intelligence Committee, is Jewish and has been targeted with death threats since Trump’s Tweets. (Israel, 2020; Obeidallah, 2020)

Imagine if Rep. Ilhan Omar—or any other visible Democrat—continually called a GOP Jewish member of Congress “shifty.” It would be vocally, and rightly, condemned as anti-Semitic. But with Trump, there’s silence from groups like the Republican Jewish Coalition, which condemned Omar for her use of an anti-Semitic trope in a tweet last year, which she apologized for and has not used again. This partisan double standard is dangerous. (Obeidallah, 2020, para. 6)

It would appear, that just like their leader, most Republicans are willing to put political power ahead of rejecting anti-Semitism. Many Jewish Republicans are so enamored of Trump’s support for Israel that they simply ignore the stoking of anti-Semitism from his dog whistles. History indicates that this is a very dangerous game to play.

**Sexual Orientation Is Still a Political Issue**

Various religious groups have traditionally scorned lesbians and gay men as abominations who violate the tenets of religious texts that men and women should propagate. LGBT individuals are seen as a direct threat to the structure and order of traditional religion. Tribes always look for out-groups to attack (Chua, 2018) and LGBT individuals are perfect for the role. Conservatives, even some religious fundamentalists, are more able to accept sexual orientation diversity if they believe that it is an inborn trait. The problem is that interpreting the research findings is challenging, bringing as it does the human element of emotional commitment to a pre-existing belief system. This is true for both conservatives and liberals.

**Motivated Reasoning, Attribution Theory and the Politics of Same-Sex Sexual Orientation**

Motivated reasoning theory indicates that emotional motivation affects cognitions such that “people are more likely to arrive at those conclusions that they want to arrive at (Kunda, 1990, p. 495). Motivated reasoning largely determines the views of conservatives and liberals toward research data on sexual orientation diversity. Liberals tend toward environmental, social constructionism views of race and socioeconomic class. Conservatives tend toward genetic determinism views of race and social class. When it comes to sexual orientation diversity, they flip perspectives (Robison, 2016).

Using attribution theory, Fritz Heider (1958) maintained that people explain the behavior of other people based on either external or internal causes. If the cause is
perceived to be internal then the behavior should be controllable, whereas external causes are not under one’s control.

Conservatives start out being against sexual orientation diversity because it upsets the narrative of social order based on heterosexual family stability, male dominance, and religious righteousness. Same-sex orientation is judged to be an internally caused lifestyle choice (Wood & Bartkowski, 2004) and therefore changeable. Liberals support diversity and perceive same-sex orientation to externally determined by the action of genetics, and therefore not under the control of the individual (Whitehead, 2014). In both cases motivated reasoning is at work. People believe the data that supports their ideologies, even if it means switching from genetic determinism to social constructionism for conservatives or the opposite for liberals.

The absurdity of political orientations determining perspectives on sexual orientation is obvious. As it turns out, there is no need for liberals to support genetic determinism because the research on sexual orientation is moving toward the interactive complexity of epigenetics. This nature via nurture dynamic of epigenetics shows that the developmental environment regulates the genetic flow (Ngun & Vilain, 2014; Rice, Friberg, & Gavrilets, 2012). The developmental interaction of environment and genes is so intimate that it is a single incredibly complex process. Human desire is embedded somewhere in that complexity.

Unfortunately, conservatives are less likely than liberals to embrace epigenetics because of the large ambiguity factor involved. Epigenetics is a process, not a thing. The complex developmental interaction between genetic heritage and environmental influence does not meet the cognitive requirements for simple causality that conservatives prefer (Jost et al., 2003).

The research on sexual orientation will continue, solving little of the problem of differing conservative and liberal perspectives. There is, however, a simpler way to look at things offered by lesbian and gay researchers into human sexual orientation.

Applied to sexual orientation, it makes sense to say that people choose their sexual partners, but it doesn’t make sense to say that they choose their desires. Sexual orientation is defined as relative desire for same-sex or other-sex sex partners. Thus, it makes no sense to say that one chooses one’s sexual orientation. One does, however, choose to behave consistently or inconsistently with one’s sexual orientation. That is a lifestyle choice. (Bailey et al., 2016, p. 62)

**Legal Same-Sex Marriage and Rapid Social Change**

Toffler (1970) indicated that it is the speed of social change that most brings on a state of Future Shock. One of the fastest social changes in history was the federal legalization of same-sex marriage in a Supreme Court decision (Obergefell v. Hodges) rendered on June 26, 2015. Because same-sex marriage was legalized by the courts and not the legislature and president, many Americans felt that same-sex marriage recognition was forced on them and they had no control over the matter through their legislators.
Conservatives and liberals differ significantly in their attitudes toward LGBT people. Same-sex marriage has been a direct threat to conservative beliefs (van der Toorn, Jost, Packer, Noorbaloochi, & Van Bavel, 2017; Whitehead, 2014). Just as there has been a rise in anti-Semitism with the Trump presidency, there has been a destruction of protections for LGBT people by the Trump administration and an increase in violence toward LGBT people, especially transgender people (Chibbaro, 2019; Diamond, 2018; Khullar, 2018).

Anti-LGBTQ groups have become intertwined with the Trump administration, and—after years of civil rights progress and growing acceptance among the broader American public—anti-LGBTQ sentiment within the Republican Party is rising. Groups that vilify the LGBTQ community, in fact, represented the fastest-growing sector among hate groups in 2019—expanding from 49 in 2018 to 70 in 2019, a nearly 43% increase. (Southern Poverty Law Center Report, 2020, p. 12).

Gay marriage has not been the panacea that many heterosexual people assume. Gays can be married one day and lose their jobs the next day. There are no protections in place in the majority of states. Gays experience the highest hate-based violence of any group. The Trump administration has rolled back many federal protections (Diamond, 2018). Health care is a major area of discrimination (Kates, Ranji, Salganicoff, & Dawson, 2018; Khullar, 2018).

Legalized discrimination against gay people by religious organizations is increasing and does great damage to LGBT people (Human Rights Report, 2018). The clash between the conservative need for absolute inviolable religious structure, and the human rights of people condemned by those conservative religious institutions, has direct political ramifications and deep psychological underpinnings. Recently, a child was turned away from a Catholic school in Kansas because the parents were a married same-sex couple. The archdiocese posted a notice on its website indicating that same-sex parents “cannot model behaviors and attitudes regarding marriage and sexual morality consistent with essential components of the Church’s teaching” (Hauser, 2019, p. 17). At the same time the diocese recognizes that other dioceses have found ways to admit children of same-sex parents to their schools. Clearly, the rejection of LGBT couples and their children is less a matter of scripture and more a matter of how conservative or liberal the diocese is, yet the law protects the right of an individual diocese to discriminate.

The law lets businesses discriminate too. A tax preparation service in Indiana refused to prepare a couple’s taxes after their same-sex marriage. Religious principles were evoked by the owner (Ryckaert, 2019). Trying to buy a wedding cake in Colorado caused such a furor it went all the way to the Supreme Court. The baker won the right to discriminate against lesbians and gay men (Liptak, 2018).

Since 2015, support for LGBT rights has either remained the same or even increased among Southerners, Muslims, Mormons, political independents, and seniors but a glaring exception is Republicans under the age of 30. The decrease in support for laws protecting LGBT rights is from 74% to 63%. The interpretation offered by Dr. Robert P. Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute that did the study is that the “Republican Party is becoming more ideologically pure” (Murphy, 2019, p. A11) because more socially liberal young Republicans are leaving the party and identifying as independents.
In Great Britain, where Parliament legalized same-sex marriage for England and Wales in 2014, a pattern similar to Republican homophobia in the U.S., is evident among Conservative party members. Gay sex is viewed as unnatural by 61% of Conservatives and 59% of those who voted to leave the European Union (Brexit). In Great Britain a pattern similar to Republican homophobia in the U.S. is evident among Conservative party members. Gay sex is viewed as unnatural by 61% of Conservatives and 59% of those who voted to leave the European Union (Brexit). Adding an age analysis is revealing. In Britain, of those over age 65, 69% believe that gay sex is unnatural. For young people between the ages of 18 and 24, a total of 78% view gay sex as being natural (Bienkov, 2017). Resistance to destabilizing social change would appear to be a large factor driving the attitudes of many older people in this regard.

Transgender Threat to Cognitive Rigidity and Patriarchy

Even those who are more or less accepting of same-sex orientation, find a greater challenge with transgender people. The fight over “bathroom laws” has been ugly and meant to energize Trump’s base and conservatives in general. Given the rigid cognitive style prevalent among conservatives and especially authoritarians, transgender presents the ultimate problem of understanding and acceptance. Cognitive fluidity is of considerable aid in truly understanding that a person can be born with the sexual anatomy of one sex and be firmly psychologically identified with another sex. Trump has capitalized on the cognitive rigidity of conservatives and the powerful masculinity image of authoritarians to pander to his base by revoking transgender rights, especially with regard to serving in the military (the ultimate male institution under threat by women and transgender people).

Progress on transgender issues, and the very existence of transgender individuals, also challenges the basis of male hegemony, because it blurs the boundary between men and women. The directives from the Trump administration on strictly delineating and defining sex as binary, immutable and determined by chromosomes and natal genital anatomy are basically attempts to demarcate a red line between men and women. (Haider, 2018, para. 5)

Cognitive rigidity interacting with the patriarchal social structure makes both bi-racial people and transgender people, a gray area problem in a cognitive world of black and white. This is resolved by categorizing even the lightest skin bi-racial people as “black”, and by denying the legitimacy of transgender existence.

Racism

Despite declarations of a “post-racial society” after Barack Obama was elected to the presidency in 2008, racism is rampant in 2019. According to the 2016 Pew Report, *On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites Are Worlds Apart*, how you view racism depends on your color. “Blacks, far more than whites, say black
people are treated unfairly across different realms of life, from dealing with the
crime police to applying for a loan or mortgage. And, for many blacks, racial equality
remains an elusive goal” (Pew Research Center, 2016, para. 1).

With Donald Trump’s election based largely on racism, things are looking grim
for racial equality in the United States. Violence by police against unarmed black men has become an epidemic (Khan, 2019; The Times Editorial Board, 2020). Police killings of unarmed black women happen more frequently than most people are aware of (Murphy, 2020). Inferior schools, housing, and jobs are still typical for African-Americans. School segregation is still the norm (Meatto, 2019). Housing remains largely segregated (Vock, Charles, & Maciag, 2019). Black people are rarely found in high-paying jobs (Martin, Horton, & Booker, 2015; Salsberg & Kastanis, 2018).

There is a dramatic split between white Democrats and Republicans in how rac-

ism in America is viewed.

While about eight-in-ten (78%) white Democrats say the country needs to continue making changes to achieve racial equality between whites and blacks, just 36% of white Republicans agree; 54% of white Republicans believe the country has already made the changes neces-
sary for blacks to have equal rights with whites. (Pew Research Center, 2016, para. 12)

The Democratic presidential primary for the 2020 election has shown just how far the Democratic Party has come in recognizing the depth and breadth of racial discrimination against black people in the United States.

The Democratic candidates are portraying America as infected with racism more openly and insistently than any previous party leaders, even Barack Obama, the first African American president. Many of the Democrats are explicitly calling Trump a racist and some have expressed sympathy for the concept of providing reparations to African Americans for the long-term impact of slavery. (Brownstein, 2019, Rhetoric is raising issues’ profile, para. 2)

Trump has incited violence against African-Americans, as well as Jews and gays (Dean & Altemeyer, 2019; Feinberg, Branton, & Martinez-Ebers, 2019). The Trump era has seen some of the worst racist violence in modern times.

**Restoring Democracy**

Much of the solution to Donald Trump is political. The presidential election of 2020 offers hope that he can be replaced in a democratic fashion. Unless the Democratic party takes the Senate and holds onto the House of Representatives, a change of presidents won’t be enough to begin to undo the damage to democracy done by Trump and the Republican party. The hatred, prejudice and violence unleashed by Trump will require new legal interventions. Unless the psychological allure of total-
itarianism can be addressed, the authoritarian behaviors of many Americans will simply be driven underground again.
The consequences of social change that have driven populist reactions need to be addressed. A good deal of the problem is psychological and therefore requires better communication and understanding. The changing demographics of America require more outreach to whites who feel threatened. Ignoring or insulting fearful white Americans is not helpful in reducing authoritarian orientations. Recognizing the challenge and responding in good faith may move us forward to a more balanced America.

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