

Confronting Political Absolutism after Trump: How To Defend Democracy

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Donald Trump has mastered the politics of ridicule. He knows how to attack. His belligerent manner draws upon a successful, well-established Republican strategy of ridicule and attack—a strategy that the Democratic Party has failed to understand.

Now democracy itself is under attack. To defend democracy effectively, we need to do more than counter-attack with wittier, more honest, more intellectually substantial ridicule of our own. We need a strategy that will attract reasonable, moderate people to our side—no matter how they have voted in the past. Flame-thrower rhetoric won't persuade these voters.

To devise a shrewd, successful alternative to the politics of ridicule, we need some backstory on the radical partisanship fostered by generations of Republican political strategy. More seriously yet, we must understand the dangerous conceptual origins of this strategy, because that's our key to building—and rebuilding—a reasonable, reality-based national political consensus.

The Hard-Right Attack on Democracy

Since the 1930s, the Republican party has divided the nation into Us and Them, Winners and Losers, Makers and Takers, Saved and Damned, Upright and Sinful. Such rancor against other Americans in effect denies that all of us are created equal and endowed with equal rights that can neither be surrendered nor taken away. The intentional divisiveness of the

hard Right has increasingly controlled the Republican party. It has co-opted the "brand identity," so to speak, of moderate-mainline Republicanism just as, over the same decades, a hard-Right fundamentalism has redefined the public identity of Christianity.

This Republican strategy first emerges in opposition both to the progressive-Christian Social Gospel and to Roosevelt's New Deal. Princeton historian Kevin Kruse documents that process from the late 1930s through the McCarthy era as *In God We Trust: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. Rice University historian William Martin in effect continues the story in equally magisterial detail in *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*.

Martin documents how Republicans attacked the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in order to attract the votes of white Southern Evangelicals—who ordinarily voted for Democrats when they voted at all. This attack on black Americans was so successful in attracting new voters to the Republican party that the hard Right recycled the same arguments against women's rights and then against gay people. (The first fund-raising letter for the newly formed Moral Majority sought donations for a "war on homosexuality.")

The hard Right has continued to demonize subsets of Americans: Latinos, Muslims, immigrants from anywhere, refugees fleeing horrific violence, and even transgender teenagers. As Martin explains, an existing high-wattage network of evangelical-Christian radio stations provided a basis for today's niche-media hate-mongering. For generations now, "intrusive government regulations" threatening "our way of life" has been dog-whistle political code rallying political opposition to equal rights under the law.

Beginning with Ronald Regan, and continuing through the Koch-funded Tea Party network, "the government" has been attacked as yet another enemy on the Republican enemies list. "Starve the Beast" spending cuts have damaged the national interest by hampering essential services and functions. As cultural historians have repeatedly warned, deliberately crippling the national government in effect lays the groundwork for the emergence of an authoritarian "strong-man" autocrat claiming that he alone can meet the needs (like job-training programs and infrastructure projects) that the increasingly crippled government can no longer provide.

Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson explain where this hard-Right legislative agenda will get us in their aptly titled, *How Nations Fail*. Strong central governments are consistently opposed by "extractive elites," they explain, because strong central governments create and sustain a growing, dynamic, broadly inclusive economy. They do so in many ways. First, strong central governments maintain and administer the legal and financial systems that prevent abuse and fraud, protect consumers, and maintain a level legal and economic playing-field for smaller competitors and disruptive entrepreneurial innovators. Second, strong central governments assure an independent workforce that is adequately educated, appropriately trained, healthy, and properly housed—and not overwhelmed by the needs of the very young, the very old, and the disabled in their families. Third, strong central governments assure and maintain infrastructure and equality of access to infrastructure: well-paved street and roads, bridges that don't sway with each passing truck; clean air and water; electricity and high-speed internet access even in rural areas where for-profit companies would not profit by running cable; and publicly-financed public transportation networks, which are essential both to a vibrant and

inclusive economy and to helping to limit our fossil-fuel consumption, traffic, and automobile exhaust. I'd add to the list that strong central governments also help to facilitate the development of clean, renewable energy grids—a complex public-private issue where the nation most needs moderate Democrats and moderate Republican to share expertise, experience, and problem-solving skills.

That's not happening. Under the Trump administration, major federal agencies are now led by ideologues determined to undermine the mission of the agencies they head. That's a deliberate dismantling of necessary government functions. It would be headline news on a daily basis, not a passing mention, except that Trump's amateur-hour foreign policy and his incessant personal antics deflect media attention from his administration's assault upon the structures of democracy.

Because Trump is crude and transparently mendacious in his ridicule rather than slick and focus-grouped, his version of this familiar Republican attack-the-government strategy has awakened many ordinary Americans to a threat that has been building for far too long. Americans who have never before attended a town hall or called their government representatives are now meeting in high school gyms all over the country, anxiously asking one another "what do we do now?"

Here's what we have to do: we have to understand how we got ourselves into this mess. First, we must understand how the Democratic party has played into Republican scapegoating rather than calling them out on it.

Second, we must understand the deeper historical and cultural origins of Republican scapegoating. We need to know that because it helps to illuminate the very different worldview that unites the progressive Left. At

the moment, the Left is badly fractured along lines of race and religion, a fact that the Brookings Institution delineates in its April 2014 report, *Faith in Equality*. In this moment of crisis, we cannot afford to be splintered. We must get our acts together; we must craft a strategy and a message that will make appealing sense to the vast array of ordinary decent Americans in blue states and red states alike.

Getting our acts together requires an honest appraisal of how the Left has been consistently bamboozled by the hard Right. Let's take a hard look at how that happened.

The Strategic Failure of the Left

Here's the big mistake: the Democratic party has been unable to defend democracy because it has in effect capitulated to the hard Right claim that the Republican party represents both authentic American patriotism and the moral high ground in American politics. They do not.

Here's how that error has played out. The Left has not consistently argued that scapegoating any American is an attack on the great American Idea that all of us—every single one of us—possess equal honor in the eyes of God, in the eyes of the law, and in the eyes of every patriotic American. Anyone who attacks any American is thereby attacking all of us, because we are one nation united by our commitment to this great and genuinely revolutionary America Idea. Such attacks are both irrational and immoral: they undermine national unity, national security, and economic vitality; they violate the rudimentary biblical demands that we love our neighbors as ourselves and welcome the "stranger"—the immigrants, the refugees, and anyone whose ethnicity or sexual orientation differs from our own.

Rather than standing up in this way for a broad, appealing vision of who we are as Americans, Democrats have played into the Republican strategy. The Democratic party has tried to assemble a winning coalition of "losers"—a coalition of Americans who have been fraudulently attacked and ridiculed by Republicans. As a result, Republicans have successfully accused Democrats of pandering to "special interests" and appealing to a "victim mentality." Republicans have successfully denounced as "political correctness" what most Americans ordinarily would recognize as common courtesy and rudimentary respect for human equality.

Worse yet, the Left does not even defend the scapegoated effectively, because we have not responded to the conceptual origin of these attacks. The Left marshals rigorous research by credentialed experts as if the hard Right did not ridicule "experts" as partisan liars who are equally guilty of defending the indefensible. The Left presents data about disparate impacts upon vulnerable populations as if everyone already agreed that disparate impacts are both unAmerican and morally repugnant. The Left documents economic disparities as if everyone already agreed that obscene disparities testify against both our patriotism and our own essential humanity. The Left presents scientific evidence of potentially catastrophic climate change as if everyone already agreed that of course we are morally responsible to the planet, to the future, to curbing our own guilty consumerism, and above all to the moral quality of American global leadership.

But everyone does not agree. Republican party orthodoxy has for decades denied all of this, both the facts and the moral presuppositions behind assembling the facts. The radical Right does not agree because for decades they have undermined the classic Christian and American consensus that *of course* we are morally obligated to serve the common

good. They believe we are not thus obligated. They believe our only obligation is to our own narrow short-term economic self-interest. They believe that in the long run everyone everywhere will be better off if each us is free to care only about ourselves. In certain limited ways, that argument has some undeniable merit. But as a sweeping philosophy of government—as a radical ideology on the hard Right—such thinking is the social-justice equivalent of trickle-down economics.

The facts stack up against such claims. As spiritual masters, philosophical sages, psychologists, and public-health experts all testify, unbridled self-interest is self-destructive. It's both immoral and foolish. In philosophical terms, the radically self-centered individualism of the Republican party is a failure of moral imagination.

Baffled by this state of affairs, I spent fifteen years researching the cultural and theological roots of Christian fundamentalism—the rigidly authoritarian, literal-minded, brutally judgmental, anti-science, anti-gay, implicitly violent, hate-mongering ideology that has come to be called the Religious Right. Over the last ninety years, the Religious Right has spread a false veneer of pseudo-Christian piety across the hard-Right politics of hate-mongering and economic exploitation. Why did that veneer succeed? How did it succeed? I started reading. And writing.

I came away with a single major insight. It made the election of someone like Trump feel almost inevitable. The most virulent forms of Christian fundamentalism and the most virulent anti-government radicals in the Republican party share a core "theology." In religious terms, they worship the same "god"—and Trump is its utterly predictable avatar.

The Cultural Origins of Hard-Right Absolutism

Both the Religious-Right absolutists and the anti-government absolutists believe that reality is governed by a single all-powerful force that is beyond human question. Both varieties of absolutism qualify as blindly "modernist" belief systems. They generate remarkably similar political strategies that the Right has used with great success to silence and to thwart progressives. We must understand these strategies if we are going to design an effective strategy of our own.

The universal forces worshipped on the hard Right are supremely powerful, ruthlessly violent, and relentlessly vindictive. They must be obeyed without question. They divide humanity into Us and Them, Saved and Damned, Winners and Losers, Worthy Rich and Lazy Poor.

Nietzsche clearly formulates the social ethics derived from these forces: "The weak and the failures shall perish . . . And they shall even be given every possible assistance. What is more harmful than any vice? Active pity for all the failures and all the weak" (*The Antichrist*, 1895, §2). That's why the Right so incessantly attacks those it deems Losers—which is to say, anyone whose civil rights have been abused in the past by rich powerful white reactionaries. These Losers would not *be* Losers if they were not guilty of weak character and failure to meet standards. They deserve what is done to them.

For economic libertarians, and as Harvey Cox wittily explained in *The Atlantic* in 1999, the absolute force is The Market. In Market ideology, Profit is the supreme virtue. What matters is making money. Nothing else counts. And nothing should get in the way. Obscene income disparity merely attests to the virtue of the rich.

The Religious-Right "prosperity gospel" transparently reflects Market absolutism. But that's not the most dangerous aspect of religious

fundamentalism. The greater threat—the political dimension demanding an urgent political response by progressives—is how the Religious Right sacralizes violence. For them, God himself is both violent and vindictive. That means human violence—even horrific violence like the Crusades or the Inquisitions—can be at times morally justified. It can be morally required. It can in fact be holy. All we need is confidence that our violence reflects the will of God—confidence that has seldom been in short supply among politically ambitious Christian reactionaries. This remarkably dangerous theology derives from a ninth century mutation introduced into Christian thought under pressure from the emperor Charlemagne—a fascinating story told by Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock in *Saving Paradise*.

Highly politicized Christian fundamentalism first shows up in modern dress in the 1870s and 1880s. It appears in two closely related, profoundly authoritarian forms: biblical inerrancy and papal infallibility. This reactionary turn within the churches explicitly sought to discredit scholarly experts in biblical studies, biology, and geology. It was also a stunning rebuke to progressive Christians just after their greatest moral victory (and their most potent threat to profits): the abolition of slavery. Christian progressives led the abolitionist movement just as Christian progressives would later lead the Civil Rights movement.

Biblical inerrancy and papal infallibility had secular equivalents. All across the European intellectual landscape in the later 1800s, thinkers were proposing one after another of these single, ineluctable, all-powerful entities that could be made to explain and account for everything. Those who understood these hidden entities could thereby achieve control over everything—the totalitarian political equivalent of the fabled Philosopher's

Stone that could turn base metals into gold. That's why we call these ideologies "totalitarianism": they claim to explain and thus control the "totality" of human society.

Religious-Right absolutists like Ted Cruz want "the church" to control the state so as to impose universal obedience to what biblical literalists claim the Bible demands. Market absolutists like the Koch brothers and their cadre in Congress do not want to be hampered by the common good as a basis for law: they are flatly opposed to the modern equal-rights nation-state with its pesky regulations protecting citizens, workers, the water supply, consumers, entrepreneurial competitors, and so forth.

The peculiar alliance between these two groups functioned remarkably well as long as the Religious Right did not get in the way of corporate profits. And they didn't, at least not until companies started standing up for gay marriage and, more recently, for women and the transgender.

Despite these few recent defeats, the Religious Right remains an ideal partner for Market absolutists, as attested by Trump's overwhelming support among white Roman Catholics and white Evangelicals. The Religious Right is an ideal partner because Evangelicalism derives from a branch of Christianity that has long denied the ancient Jewish belief that the image of God exists in all people everywhere. These radicals believe that the image of God was destroyed by the sin of Adam and Eve; today it exists (or has been restored by God) in them alone.

For the most radical of these Christians, the separation of church and state in a genuine democracy is a transparently terrible idea because most people can't be trusted. Only they are capable of morality, and only then because their deity reaches down to render them moral. But the rest of us? Our desires are inevitably turned toward evil. In theological terms, we are

innately depraved. We do not have free will. We cannot in and of ourselves choose virtue. As a result, we need to be absolutely controlled by an absolutist state—a state run by them, of course, free from challenge by other Christians with their suspect array of experts in theology and theological history, biblical studies, and ethics.

The most radical Market fundamentalists share this dark view of the human moral character. According to them, we are all "rational actors" out for ourselves and for ourselves alone. Altruism is an illusion. Compassion is an illusion. So are win-win collaboration, honest compromise, and pragmatism in service to the common good. What the rest of us call virtue or personal integrity they dismiss as covert self-dealing. Rational-actor economics is old-fashioned innate depravity, this time without any hope for salvation. Their dark view of human nature renders democracy a dangerous illusion. It is implicitly an argument for absolutist government controlled by people who know how to make money—which is the Market definition of virtue.

No wonder the Right carries on at such length about the "permissiveness" of the Left. The Left implicitly trusts the conscience, the moral discernment, and the good judgment of free citizens in a democratic country. The Right does not, and the Right has systematically undermined our moral confidence in one another. The Left believes in the American character even as we insist that all Americans have a patriotic responsibility to the common good. The Right does not, and the Right has systematically undermined our public, patriotic commitment to the common good.

And they have done so for decades while insisting that the Left lacks patriotism.

Culture-Wars Strategy on the Right

In short, both Market absolutists and religious absolutists oppose democratic self-government of the people, by the people, and for the people. They do so for distinctively different reasons. But both groups are in their conceptual origins profoundly anti-democratic. The more clearly the Left understand that fact, the more astutely and strategically the hard Right can be opposed.

One familiar form of this alliance between religious and economic absolutists has been the so-called "culture wars." In these contests, Republican candidates promised both to impose religious-fundamentalist beliefs (like opposition gay marriage) and to advance the radical libertarianism of Market absolutists intent upon dismantling what Steve Bannon calls "the administrative state."

The culture-wars alliance made no sense to most progressives: regulate bedrooms not boardrooms? Oppose contraception yet deny funding for maternal health and childcare? Define "religious liberty" as the right to oppose the religious liberty of others? To the progressive Left, this alliance seemed inherently incoherent and thus inescapably fragile.

That perception was a naive mistake. The Left failed to recognize that both movements are radically authoritarian, radically anti-intellectual, and hence profoundly opposed to democratic norms. It took Trump, with his transparent psychological projections and his mendacious buffoonery, to make that threat clear.

Culture-wars politics succeeded through a simple trick, a rhetorical slight-of-hand I've watched them play over and over again for decades. Christian progressives making theological claims of moral obligation to the common good are dismissed out of hand by shifting to the secular language of unquestionable Market-God absolutes: fair-share contributions

by the rich to the common good are taking from the Makers and giving to the Takers. That's theft! Theft, furthermore, to give money to Sinners? What kind of Christian tries to defend theft?

Secular progressive making arguments about disparate impacts are dismissed out of hand by shifting to the religious language of Christian fundamentalism: we must not tolerate the immorality of these lazy no-good Sinners who pose such a dangerous threat to the Saved. The people experiencing these disparate impacts are simply experiencing the natural consequences of their sin. If Democrats were not such moral reprobates themselves, they would never defend these terrible, dangerous people. Democrats should be ashamed of themselves.

This two-pronged strategy leads to a single self-evident conclusion: both morality and economic rationality demand the defeat of these crazy perverse godless Democrats whose idiotic tree-huggers and give-away schemes destroy jobs and steal money from virtuous hardworking ordinary Americans.

The Strategic Alliance of Religious and Secular Progressives

To counteract this powerful strategy on the Right—to defend democracy successfully—we must begin by recognizing that secular progressives and religious progressive share a common view of reality just as the religious and the secular on the hard Right share a world-view. As we see it, reality is not the simple, linear, mechanistic, and brutal hierarchy of Winners ruling over Losers, Saved ruling over Damned. As we see it, reality itself demonstrates that caring for the common good serves individual well-being far more successfully than selfish egotism does. As I explain in *Confronting Religious Absolutism*, the proper historical name for our world-view is

"humanism," a major Western intellectual movement that began among Christian scholars (mostly clergy) in the 1300s.

Christian humanists and secular humanists share two crucial moral commitments. Christians derive these two commitments from the image of God burning brightly within every human being. Secular humanists derive these two commitments from a variety of philosophical sources. That very real diversity must not blind us to the beliefs that we share. All too often it has. That must change.

Whether religious or secular, we believe in kindness and we believe in critical thinking. We believe in human rights and we believe in intellectual integrity. We believe that all people should be treated *humanely*; and we believe that honest language plus intellectually-rigorous inquiry provide a solid, reasonably objective—albeit never infallible—basis for collaborative, pragmatic problem solving. We believe that all of us will come out ahead if national policies are based upon honesty and human decency—virtues that Trump conspicuously lacks.

And take note: from within the complex worldview of the Left, the social function of religion is not validating the power of the powerful and legitimating the wealth of the wealthy. The social function of religion is organizing people to serve and to protect the common good. That is, of course, what both Jesus and ancient Jewish prophets insisted must happen.

Our shared worldview generates a quite straightforward political-messaging strategy: Both-And.

A Straightforward Political Message

At all points, on all levels, progressives should make *both* moral *and* secular arguments supporting our pro-social, inclusive, common-good

positions on political issues. For instance, progressives should argue that exploitation of the many by the few is *both* immoral *and* irrationally self-defeating. We ought to argue that democracy based on universal human rights and public commitment to the common good is *both* morally requisite *and* demonstrably the world's best alternative to violence. And then we must link our both-and argument to patriotic duty and the national interest.

Both-And political messaging will be internally consistent because progressive Christian arguments and progressive secular arguments based on a broad swath of social-science research will naturally converge at the political level. They will converge because teachers of wisdom and epidemiologists have reached the same basic pro-social conclusions: the well-being of each is paradoxically inseparable from the well-being of the entire community. No man is an island, as John Donne warned in 1624: the loss anyone suffers has a detrimental impact on everyone else. And our nation is not an archipelago of islands, each armed to the teeth against the others.

To defend democracy, we must ceaselessly affirm what so much social-science and public-health research attests: the common good of the entire nation is served both by preserving our patriotic American ideals and by honoring the classic Judeo-Christian norms of social justice and inclusive community. We should also draw as much as we can upon the complex pro-social teachings of other global religions, a task made far simpler by books like the Dalai Lama's *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths*, Richard Schooch, *The Secrets of Happiness*, and *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*. And we should also draw upon the pro-social arguments made by classic non-religious moral systems, for which I suggest the Dalai Lama's *Beyond Religion: Ethics for the Whole*

World and Pierre Hadot's excellent guide to classic philosophical ethics, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.

And so: the Left should both cite Scripture and to hand out data charts offered by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pricket in *Spirit Level: How Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*. The Left should freely quote both liberation theology—I'd recommend Gustavo Gutierrez, for starts—and *Why Nations Fail*, by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson. Or the flat-out fascinating *Debt: The First Five Thousand Years*, by David Graeber. We must learn to segue from one set of argument to the other and back again so to make our case in the broadest, most persuasive way possible.

And we must always both begin and conclude by insisting that to be an American is to respect other Americans. To be an American is to uphold the common good of everyone standing on American soil. These are the essential American obligations that the hard Right consistently denies. Their denial damages the national interest. It compromises our security. And it diminishes America in the eyes of the world.

Can We Defend Democracy?

The task before us is daunting. That's why religious progressives, secular progressives, and subject-area experts (that suspect crowd!) must collaborate freely, share resources, and learn from one another. It's not enough to host panels with speakers from each of the scapegoated communities and then include a couple of professors, a couple of pastors, a rabbi, and maybe a Hindu or Buddhist teacher if there's one around. We cannot continue to be a coalition of "special interests" who barely speak to one another otherwise. We must learn enough from one another to frame issues broadly and craft arguments persuasively.

This robust collaboration will require a certain humility and generous open-mindedness all around. Secular progressives must be willing to imagine that not all Christians are Religious Right fundamentalists. Christian progressives in turn must be willing to imagine that not all of the "unchurched" are New Atheist types who believe that all religion is pernicious. Everybody will have to listen to the subject-area experts who have evidence-based arguments to make about what constitutes "the national interest" or "national security."

And that's not all we must do. White progressives (religious and secular alike) must recognize that black progressives (religious and secular alike) have been fighting these fights far longer than we. We have much to learn both from their resilience and from their skepticism. America has made some real progress on race, heaven knows. But Republican scapegoating achieved the centrality it did by appealing to racism. That pernicious denial of equal rights has now metastasized to threaten all of us—and thus to threaten democracy itself.

In the March on Washington last January, I saw a placard reading, "They came for the Muslims and I said NOT IN MY AMERICA, MOTHER-F——." But they came for the blacks first and a very long time ago. Black people understand most clearly what is at stake today because they know first hand just how fragile democracy has always been. All those bystander videos of police brutality have given white Americans a small glimpse of what black Americans have known for centuries.

If we can get all of our acts together—which is no small challenge—the Democratic party can begin to advocate in reasonably unified way for the great American Idea: a nation can be based not on race or religion or ethnicity but on universal human rights and shared commitment to the

common good. But even if the Democratic party can't pull that off, each of us can speak up in our own ways, in our own words, to friends and neighbors and elected officials. It's up to us, in all of these thousands of ordinary conversations rippling across the country, to demonstrate yet again that a nation thus founded can in fact endure.

Not long ago I copied out by hand two famous passages from American history. The first is from the Declaration of Independence; the second is the Preamble to the Constitution.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. —That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

I've kept that handwritten page on my desk for some time now. Each time the page surfaces amidst the clutter of my desk and my other obligations, I read it again. Each time I am moved more deeply by the simplicity, scope, and boldness of this vision.

As Scripture warns, "Without a vision, the people perish." We must claim *and reclaim* the vision that we share as Americans, lest democracy perish. If democracy perish, it will perish on our watch. History will remember and lament our failure to defend America.

