

## **CAN THE U.S. DEMOCRACY BE FIXED?<sup>1</sup>**

Richard FALK,<sup>2</sup>  
Princeton University

**Abstract:** This article suggests that Trump's presidency threatens the United States with a fascist future, and this threat persist even if he fails to be reelected. The article also considers other deficiencies of U.S. democracy including antiquated vote counting, voter suppression aimed at poor and minorities, rejections of reason and science, excessive influence of money, and political disempowerment of the citizenry. Only a transformative progressive movement outside the party system can fix U.S. democracy.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Fascism, Trump, Disempowerment, Voter Suppression, Plutocracy, Political Parties

### **The 2020 Election and its Aftermath**

I share the view that the 2020 election in the United States is above all a referendum on fascism, and for this reason alone an Congress by the Democratic Party.<sup>3</sup> As I write, there is no assurance about either the outcd many other considerations, I hope it produces a Biden landslide, including control of the U.S. ome of the election or its aftermath, and although it looks now as if Biden will prevail, many dark clouds of uncertainty fill the skies above the United States, with even hints of civil strife.

It is my fervent wish that a Biden victory would be followed by a smooth transfer of political power, but the Trump White House in a fashion unprecedented in American national elections cast doubts in advance as to whether it would accept defeat. This kind of of posturing may be a bluff, but it made it hard to believe that a benign political scenario would materialize. Either Trump won, and a fascist future for this global state would deliver a dire message not just to America, but to the world, or Biden wins, and the election results would be contested, strife ensures as

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<sup>2</sup> Contact address: falk@global.ucsb.edu

<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, referring to the future of a Trump presidency as 'fascist' is contentious and judgmental. It rests on my perceptions of the militarist orientation of such political leadership together with an interpretation of essential qualities that are associated with fascism. It also recognizes that fascism is not tied to the Nazi or Italian precedents. As others have observed, fascism would come to America in a distinctive form. A more benign conjectural pre-Trump depiction is set forth by Bertram Gross (1985); for anticipatory warnings of a fascist future in Europe see Ortega y Gasset (1932).

Trump unleashes rightest militias, and the future of constitutional government in the United States would depend on whether the military would mount an anti-Trump soft coup.

This first military coup in American history was an almost unthinkable scenario until Trump came along.<sup>4</sup> Even if Trump was successfully removed from the White House, the fascist cause is likely to flourish in the belly of American society as his more ardent followers are disposed to incite a national insurgent political movement rather than accept the political defeat of their revered demagogue who was defeated in accord with the defunct legalist rules of the game. One telltale sign of a fascist worldview has been redefining the game of politics as a contest to be won or lost in the domains of violent power rather than in voting booths and according to standards set by the rule of law.

And even if these horrors were avoided, or dealt with in a responsible and effective manner, the aftermath is likely to be deeply unpleasant, and mutually recriminatory. The overarching question could turn out to be whether Donald Trump's multiple crimes in and out of office shall be shielded from prosecution, creating a damaging precedent of impunity with respect to presidential accountability. Contrariwise, if accountability were to be pursued and the rule of law upheld, would the result be myriad trials, calls of political martyrdom, and a distracting spectacle that kept attention shifted away from the several challenges of domestic and global reform. Further intensification of civic polarization could lead to political paralysis, violent strife, and growing citizen unrest and alienation.

Maybe a fitting solution for Trump and the country, although likely only to those of us dwelling in the realm of phantasy, would be asylum for Trump in Putin's Russia. This kind of 'retirement' arrangement would have the delicious irony of having Trump share his place of refuge with Edward Snowden. There is a kind of political poetry present as Snowden revealed to the world damning secrets about the U.S. surveillance regime while Trump is trying his hardest to keep his multiple nefarious doings as secret and hidden as possible for as long as possible. Although imaginative treatments of what to do with citizen Trump can entertain us, the actuality of fitting the punishment to his multiple crimes might prove daunting even if the political atmosphere began to favor accountability for political leaders.

It is instructive to recall that Obama closed his eyes to the crimes of his predecessor, George W. Bush, especially the formal endorsement of torture under the falsifying rubric of 'enhanced interrogation' or the disastrous and unlawful attack and occupation of Iraq that commenced in 2003. Obama relied on the rationale that it was more desirable for the country to look to the future than to look back at controversial and divisive encroachments on the rule of law. It was certainly reasonable to believe that tacit impunity for Bush's complicity in the commission of international crimes likely avoided flurries of domestic acrimony. Yet this was a Faustian Bargain. By failing to create a tradition of presidential accountability for violations of international criminal law, a precedent was set that could serve as a helpful line of defense should Trump find himself

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<sup>4</sup> 'Almost' because Richard Nixon's early posture of defiance during the Watergate hearings (1972-74) created some conjectures of a military takeover if he refused to leave the White House despite being convicted in a forthcoming impeachment trial. The crisis was averted by Nixon's resignation.

someday prosecuted. His lawyers and partisans would cry foul, claiming that this fallen leader was the victim of double standards. If impunity prevails, it would send a cynical message that, as at the UN, only the weak are subject to the procedures and norms of accountability.

The Framing Question: Is Trump and Trumpism a Vehicle for a Fascist Future?

Many argue that it is premature, or irresponsible, to describe the Trump phenomenon by reference to fascism.<sup>5</sup> Such critics point to the absence of death camps or nakedly aggressive warfare and conquest as were so emblematic expressions of fascism by Germany, Japan, and Italy. These fascist antecedents seem quite a remove from the autocratic style of Trump who cajoles his friends, disparages his adversaries, and twists truth and governmental operations to serve his pro-wealth, anti-immigrant agenda, and threat diplomacy. As yet, however, Trump has not yet resorted to crude oppressive tactics against domestic enemies or outright aggression against foreign antagonists, despite supporting a variety of unsettling provocations at home and abroad.

The core ideas of fascism seem associated with a supreme leader of a sovereign state, rejecting accountability to any earthly source of authority, presiding over totalitarian governance structures that criminalize all manifestations of opposition and relying on excessive violence as a matter of principle, rationalized by total indoctrination in the belief system of the prevailing ideology, all-powerful military forces and instruments of oppression, and a sense of heroic national destiny to be achieved at the expense of all, including citizens, who stand in the way. Such a constellation of elements can take many forms, and it is my belief that the political style and worldview of Donald Trump if it exerts further control over the governance of the United States for the next four years will seek to abolish the residues of constitutional democracy to a degree that makes the apprehension of a fascist threat not only the melodramatic apprehension of leftists, but the only responsible interpretation of how the political process is developing in the country. It is from this perspective that the November 2020 election should be looked back upon as a referendum on fascism, which depending on its outcome could push autocratic trends beyond fascist markers in the years ahead.<sup>6</sup>

## **Deeper Structural Concerns**

### **(1) Reimagining U.S. Federalism**

Even in the unlikely event that all went well procedurally during and after the 2020 elections, it is not a time to gloat about the vindication of the American version of constitutional democracy. Should Trump upset present expectations, and win in November, he will almost certainly again

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<sup>5</sup> It is notable that despite the extreme denunciation of Trump by his Democratic opponents, they refrained from alleging a fascist threat from a Republican Party victory. More radical opponents of Trump argued that fascism was already embodied in Trump's governing policies and practices. In Trump's campaign there was no reluctance to warn the American public that Biden was a vehicle for 'socialism' and 'the radical left.'

<sup>6</sup> Such a referendum, assuming Trump's rejection, should not be taken as conclusive. The political virus is clearly present in the American body politic, and having been encouraged during the Trump presidency will undoubtedly find new ways to assert its claims to political governance.

have the perverse, and now anachronistic, peculiarities of the Electoral College to thank.<sup>7</sup> Trump will have little trouble putting out of mind the awkward fact that he again prevailed, as in 2016, despite winning several million fewer votes than his defeated opponent. Under present national conditions, there is no reasonable rationale for treating votes in Idaho or Montana as more deserving of influence than a vote in California or New York. The winner in each state gets the whole of its Electoral College vote whether the margin of victory is one vote or one million votes. Democracy as a political system loses legitimacy whenever it cannot dislodge such anachronistic quirks in its electoral system, and the *real* mandate of a voting majority of the citizenry is denied the fruits of victory, especially as politicians regardless of their political ideology are appealing to 'the American people' as their primary constituency, not the residents of this and that state.

Of course, there is a seeming riposte to the effect that the large populations of these two coastal states, with their disproportionate attachment to liberal values, would almost always dominate the electoral process, although not reflecting the country as a whole if it is perceived spatially rather than demographically. It is also claimed that this kind of direct citizen voting framework would further marginalize the relevance of the 'flyover' states, and in this sense further weaken the federalist character of the republic, which was integral to the envisioned constitutional balance between unity and decentralization that informed the vision of the founders.

As such what is put in relief are two distinct questions: was the Electoral College a clever solution to this challenge of empowering and protecting diversity while creating a desirable level of unity when the United States was established as a mega-state in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century that superseded the thirteen prior 'colonies' constituted by the British Empire? Has this 'solution' become in recent decades an outmoded model of federalism given digitized re-framings of people, ideas, and consciousness that has so far occurred in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? These re-framings exhibit a variety of tendencies toward both greater localism and centralism, with diminished relevance accorded to sub-units constituting the sovereign state as political actor. Put differently, is not the country at a stage of political development that federalism, and constitutionalism more generally, needs to be reimagined from ecological, equitable, cyber, temporal, humanist, localist, and cosmopolitan perspectives?<sup>8</sup> Such reimagining would lead to a deemphasis on the spatial compartmentalization of 50 distinct political entities in the context of national elections as well as acknowledging the deterritorialization of sovereign states, and especially the United States, as the sole 'global state.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> By 'perverse' is meant that Trump could have lost the election by several millions votes, and yet be declared the winner.

<sup>8</sup> Of particular relevance is the Constitutional commitment to promote 'life, liberty, and property,' which deliberately inserted an anti-democratic element into the social contract that framed the American republic, and dramatically departing from the more egalitarian language of the Declaration of Independence stressing 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' Although the latter is far from self-defining, the shift to upholding the entrenched interest of property holders was agreed upon in *The Federalist Papers* and highlighted in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

<sup>9</sup> Reference here is to the extra-territorial dimensions of the American worldwide security system, including over 800 foreign military bases, special forces units operating in more than 100 countries, navies patrolling the five major oceans, and incipient plans to gain military dominance in space over the entire earth. This global reach creates a

A further concern is with the impact of federalist arrangements on the wellbeing of peoples is its dual character. Federalism has given a safe harbor to the ugliest forms of racism and bigotry, but it has also given space for sanctuary and humane values when the central government turns against vulnerable parts of society in a regressive direction. The Trump phenomenon has confirmed beyond reasonable doubt that all political arrangements are fragile, subject to lethal manipulation when the self-restraint and decency of ruling elites and political parties is replaced by narcissism, greed, racism, chauvinism, criminality, demagoguery, and unprincipled partisanship.

## **(2) Rigging the Results: Voter Suppression, Obstructing Voting by Mail, Fraudulent Allegations**

As others have observed, Joe Biden needed much more than a simple majority to win the election. He needed a landslide that overcomes not just the impacts of the Electoral College, but also that neutralized the distorting effects of Republican gerrymandering, discrediting of mail-in votes, and widespread voter suppression practices designed to keep persons of color, the poor, and those living in progressive urban neighborhoods from voting at full strength. Because Republicans are so focused on winning and upholding economic privilege and class interests whatever the consequences, they have been using their extensive control of state legislatures and governorships throughout the country to to erode the franchise of their adversaries while efficiently organizing their bases of support to encourage participation in vital elections. In other words, although a ritualistic endorsement of democracy persists, the tactics employed by political parties, especially Republicans, confirm the impression that the system now privileges winning over fair competition to identify the preferences of the citizenry. To some extent this priority has always been present, but as the plutocratic features of the polity have strengthened the efforts to override the democratic ethos so-called 'dark money' has gained greater influence on all phases of electoral politics.<sup>10</sup>

Although current preoccupations focus on Republican Party behavior, the Democratic Party has its own inglorious history, which includes a past shameless reliance on machine politics featuring city hall political manipulations of voting patterns and electoral results. The 'great game' of American politics has always been to varying degrees, unscrupulous competition among ambitious political forces with many dirty tricks up their soiled sleeves. Political parties are formed to protect interests and win elections, which means that many principles tend to be put aside if seen as unpopular. One result has been to discourage most truly virtuous potential leaders from becoming engaged in such a sordid career, which would likely include finding themselves at fundamental odds with the party leadership.

Bernie Sanders is a perfect case in point, being too virtuous, too principled, and too independent, and above all, too progressive to represent the Democratic Party at the national level, and

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post-colonial form of hegemonic control that is not rooted in overt political arrangements or sovereignty claims. For another view of de-territorializing the state see Anne-Marie Slaughter (2004).

<sup>10</sup> On the plutocratic challenges being mounted to thwart the will of the people see Yascha Mounk (2018); see also Thomas Frank (2004).

this despite showing his relative popularity with the citizenry, seemingly exceeding the popularity of candidate chosen by the gatekeepers to represent the party in 2016 and 2020. From this illuminating perspective, there are certain ideological and organizational considerations that even outweigh winning elections. Concretely, the Democratic Party establishment would rather put forward the weaker candidate than risk winning with a stronger alternative who would threaten donor-driven and class interests and be seen as possibly undermining the bipartisan foreign policy consensus.

Trump's presidency has been characterized by resort to the crudest forms of manipulating law and institutions to serve the interests of wealth and even of the leader and his immediate family. The impact of these anti-democratic flaws in the electoral process, with respect to voting exclusions and biases, could be greatly lessened through the adoption of several simple, yet essential reforms: (1) automatic registration of every eligible citizen based on census records; (2) declaring the occurrence of presidential elections as a mandatory national holiday rather than held on a normal working day as at present, which reduces voting by the poorer sectors of society who are generally more restricted in overcoming practical difficulties, such as long lines and early closing times, by their jobs or family commitments; other developed country democracies all make election day a holiday; (3) a federal enactment creating uniform oversight and procedures, eliminating restrictive arrangements often operative at state and local levels (although at the possible cost of creating a greater potential for political manipulations of national scale by the party in control of the government). This danger is apparent in the current behavior of Cabinet officials during the Trump presidency, most blatantly in the behavior of Attorney General William Barr, who seems absurdly responsive to political signals from the White House rather than from law-oriented civil servants in the Department of Justice).

### **(3) The Erosion and Debasement of Choice: Breaking the 'Bipartisan Consensus'**

There are further related reasons for humility about the functioning of democracy in the United States that extend beyond the electoral system and the disturbing behavior of political parties. The most glaring shortcomings are associated with the absence of alternative approaches made available to the voting public on the most crucial issues confronting society, especially bearing on foreign policy and the structural deficiencies of state/society relations within the U.S. It relates to the failure of the two-party system when neither party possesses a willingness to support candidates who are willing to advocate overcoming the distortions on the quality of life and governance being wrought by plutocracy, global militarism, predatory capitalism, climate change, and systemic racism (Mounk 2018). Again, the bypassing of Bernie Sanders in 2016 and 2020 is illustrative of how the 'deep state' bureaucracy exerts influence over the selection of presidential candidates.

The current American version of two-party democracy has steadily decayed due to the embedded bipartisan consensus, as 'enforced' by a militarized 'deep state' bureaucracy, that was originally a functional feature of the political landscape during World War II when the country was

productively and ideologically united in support of an anti-fascist war.<sup>11</sup> This consensus became substantially and more dubiously reconstituted as the ideological foundation of an anti-Communist global crusade that set boundaries on political diversity during the long Cold War. Among the harmful effects of this two-party consensus was curtailing mainstream political debate, discrediting socialist values and advocacy, making the outcome of national elections count for far less, making a war economy and militarized state permanent fixtures of governance, generating 'a deep state' effectively entrusted with sustaining the consensus, and instrumentalizing respect for international law and the authority of the UN. Trump came along to challenge this kind of unaccountable management of the political process, but in a mindless, reactionary, chauvinistic, and autocratic manner that didn't put forth a more vibrant alternative. Along the way Trump did challenge the bipartisan consensus views on alliance relations and geopolitical alignment (especially in relation to Russia), creating confusions and tensions with the permanent government bureaucracy, and a notable shift of Republicans in national security spheres of government to urge support for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020.

It might have been hoped that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the Soviet collapse a few years later would have encouraged taking stock in Washington, a national turn toward peace, a greater openness to progressive political ideas, and more willingness to promote the global common good. Nothing of the sort occurred during the 1990s, a wasted decade of world order opportunity. The West won the Cold War, but lost the peace by its embrace of consumerism as abetted by a socially irresponsible neoliberal globalization framework. Economic policy was guided by efficiencies of capital rather than the wellbeing of peoples, resulting in widespread alienation among democratic citizenries and 'predatory capitalism' of a character not experienced since the early decades of the Industrial Revolution (Falk 1999).

First, attention was redirected to the plutocratic benefits accruing from the absence of an ideological alternative to market-driven economic policy, which meant that the ethics of greed could be practiced without adverse political consequences. Accordingly, with the support of both political parties, the U.S. Government focused its attention on making the world safe for predatory capitalism, a set of policy priorities reflecting what became known as either 'the Washington consensus' or more politely, 'neoliberal globalization.' This economistic orientation, in effect, a capitalist version of Marxist materialism, encouraged consumerist excess, environmental irresponsibility, and a downgrading of social protection and middle class living standards. This economistic turn reflected civilian and most private sector priorities. It was not entirely satisfactory for militarists and arms dealers who also wanted, and maybe required, an enemy to make the case for continuing with wartime scale military budgets and for restoring their self-esteem as guardians of national and global security underpinned by the search for what Gian Giacomo Migone has vividly described as 'the indispensable enemy.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For useful explorations of 'deep state' structure and impact see Peter Dale Scott (2010, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> This turn of phrase recalls Madeline Albright's 1998 reference, while she was Secretary of State, to the United States as 'the indispensable nation.' It was in the context of confronting Iraq, and Saddam Hussein. She made this assertion during an appearance on a TV program, 'The Today Show.' where she claimed a wish for peace, adding "Nut



The first candidate to be a post-Communist enemy was Japan, with its disciplined work force and booming economy that was seen as a growing threat to American ascendancy, at least in the Pacific. This candidate to be the new enemy seemed rather implausible as Japan was the principal U.S. ally in the Pacific region since its defeat in World War II, and was impossible to cast credibly as a security threat to American geopolitical primacy except for the embarrassing fact that it was outperforming the U.S. on world markets.

The next enemy candidate was a resurgent anti-Western Islam. Samuel Huntington's thesis of 'the clash of civilizations' attracted political attention but it still was not plausible as a threat, given Western military dominance. The clash thesis did come to enjoy a temporary dysfunctional credibility after the 9/11 attacks (Falk 2003). These attacks produced 'the war on terror,' and did have the desired galvanizing effect of re-securitizing American foreign policy with a special emphasis on the Middle East where the energy future of the world seemed to be at risk. What ensued were several disastrous military interventions that resulted in geopolitical setbacks, while causing the devastation of a series of countries subjected to strife and chaos as in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.<sup>13</sup>

Next came China, which seems to be a more familiar and plausible geopolitical adversary, but on further examination its role as a traditional 'enemy' is problematic.<sup>14</sup> China has not attempted to challenge the West militarily or ideologically, but seems to be winning the competition for markets, economic expansionism, and technological innovativeness, and is now being cast by both wings of the American political establishment as a geopolitical adversary worth confronting.<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, the Biden people seem as ready as the Trump autocracy to confront China (and Iran<sup>16</sup>), and clearly readier when it comes to Russia, although maybe in a more measured manner. Yet liberal flavored geopolitics may be more disposed to produce 'principled' long-term adversarial engagements reinforced by a hypocritical solidarity with Hong Kong protesters and Uyghur struggles for human rights.

An America disgraced at home and abroad by its terrible performance in response to the COVID-19 challenge, is a dangerous wounded political animal that has never been more at odds with the wellbeing of humanity that urgently requires refocusing on *human security*. To do so,

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if we have to use force, it is because we are America, we are the indispensable nation." See important recent book, Christian Sorensen, *Understanding War Industry* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 2020) for a well-documented explanation of how private/public benefits of high levels of military spending exert influence on governmental priorities and allocations of resources.

<sup>13</sup> Had the 9/11 attacks been treated as 'crimes' rather than as 'acts of war' we would almost certainly be living in a more stable, serene, and cooperative world, with a far enhanced capacity to address climate change and the Covid Pandemic.

<sup>14</sup> Huntington's clash of civilization thesis shifted from Islam to China in the book version of his famous article in *Foreign Affairs* (1996).

<sup>15</sup> Drawing on history Graham Allison has written a text warning of a U.S./China war waged to determine global primacy (2017). Economic rivalry is also relevant, especially China's transition from being 'the factory of world' to an emergent leader in innovative technologies that were regarded as the prime criterion of superior economic performance and earlier regarded as dominated by Silicon Valley and Western economies. See Deepak Nayyar (2019).

<sup>16</sup> The hostility to Iran seems less a matter of opposing the Islamic resurgence than it does of satisfying the wishes of Israel and Saudi Arabia, and more generally upholding regional anti-Iranian alignments in the Middle East.



requires giving a much higher policy priority to addressing climate change, nuclear weaponry, global migration, food and worker security, demilitarization, global health, and strengthened procedures for global cooperation. This kind of shift of priorities will only happen under present conditions if the militarist/plutocratic consensus is strongly challenged from outside the present party framework, by a *movement* rather than a political party.

The persistence of this dysfunctional bipartisan consensus represents an unauthorized fundamental reformulation of the social contract that continuously reshapes state/society relations to retain its status as a legitimate democracy. It is a political and moral scandal that a considerable fraction of the citizenry lacks health care, affordable higher education and housing, and even afflicting more than 10% of its population with chronic food insecurity. American society as a whole endures acute inequalities, unjust taxation, infrastructure decay, and climate change without yet mounting a serious challenge either within or outside of the two-party framework. As mentioned above, Bernie Sanders struggled twice to push the Democratic Party toward the outer limits of the bipartisan consensus, but in the end both in 2016 and 2020 he was bloodied by the DNC establishment that pushed back without restraint when finding itself in danger of being saddled with a candidate threatening the consensus and donor priorities. It is notable that Sanders, like Trump from a rightist direction, sought only to alter the outer limits of the consensus. Neither politician ever supported direct assaults on the structural features of militarism and capitalism. And in Trump's case he actually accentuated these dimensions of the consensus causing custodians concerns because of fears that his impulsiveness could engulf the world in chaos and catastrophe.

The Trump phenomenon is an extreme national example of the global populist drift away from democracy by alienated citizenries around the world who cast their votes for demagogues, that is, for individuals who are taking advantage of democratic procedures and institutions to hollow out democracy so as to move particular societies toward autocracy and extremism. Such a drift combines the distinctive features of national narratives with an overarching set of global conditions that express alienation from what 'democracy' bestowed upon their lives. To distract and divert, scapegoating (blame) and scarecrowing (fear) become rightist tactics of these moves away from democratic cohesion.<sup>17</sup> In a world of gross inequalities and dangerous global warming, there has arisen a degrading receptivity to blaming/fearing the stranger or the other for the unfairness and hardships being experienced at home in the forms of inequality, climate change, economic displacement, and erosions of national identity. Such a political atmosphere is easily exploited by the strongman and demagogue who not only make the most vulnerable segments of society suffer but also fail to respond to challenges that threaten future wellbeing of society as a whole. Trump's denialism as exhibited in response to climate change and the pandemic confirms allegations of dysfunctionality when it comes to problem-solving in the public interest, or even in the leadership role, national failures have negative global repercussions.

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<sup>17</sup> In contrast, the leftist critique emphasizes class and elite exploitation. Sanders blames the 1% whose ranks include the super-rich beneficiaries of an unjust tax structure and insufficient regulation of markets and financial institutions.

#### **(4) Disempowering the People**

The bipartisan consensus disempowers the citizenry when it comes to finding alternatives to the current failures of the American political system if evaluated from the perspectives of human security. This cumulative experience of disempowerment lasting for 80 years created an aura of normalcy associated with any long unchallenged pattern of political behavior. It helps explain low voter turnout, and until recent urgencies of climate change, the pandemic, and racism had some awakening effects, generally undermined the quality of citizen participation in the political life of the country and the overall legitimacy of democratic forms of governance.

Yet, in the American case, this degree of governmentally guided disempowerment was not enough to ensure a compliant citizenry when it came to war-making. The Washington reaction to the American defeat in Vietnam was to blame the reliance on drafted soldiers as responsible for a rising anti-war movement that gradually sapped the political will of the public to support a distant war of dubious strategic merit that was in any event being lost. This political defeat was further explained away by Pentagon apologists as due to the media portrayal of the human costs of the war leading to the perverse conclusion that the war was lost not in the combat zones of Vietnam, or to the resoluteness of the Vietnamese people, but in the living rooms of American families watching the return in coffins draped in U.S. flags of young Americans on nightly TV. The unauthorized whistleblowing release of the Pentagon Papers presented a quite different picture than that being sold to the media by state propagandists. These classified government documents showed how the failures of the war effort were being kept from the public for years, dramatizing the importance of 'secrecy' as a policy instrument to screen information from the citizenry so as not to agitate the public, in effect, censorship to avoid undercutting the (mis) adventures of global militarism.

The lessons to be learned by the national security state from this temporary democratic empowerment during the Vietnam anti-war movement was the need to reestablish an atmosphere of disempowerment in relation to the projection of American military power, thus overcoming the lasting effects of what was derisively called 'the Vietnam Syndrome' (for more context see Andersson, 2017).<sup>18</sup>

The specific steps taken confirm this effort to close the gaps in the disempowerment dimension of the bipartisan consensus, that is, not only political parties and elected representatives of the public, but the public itself as a potentially obstructive political actor as in the last stages of the American War in Vietnam. The steps taken include abolishing the draft and relying in the future on a professional army made up of volunteers, embedding mainstream media journalists with frontline combat units to skew news in pro-military directions, sanctioning whistleblowers harshly to gain more effective domestic control over the dissemination of information to the public, exerting influence over media coverage by conditioning access on sympathetic treatment

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<sup>18</sup> The phrase was used to denote the undesirable inhibitions on the use of American military power as an instrument of American foreign policy. This Vietnam Syndrome was allegedly overcome by the political outcome of the first Iraq War in 1991. For more context see Falk (Stefan Andersson, ed.), *Revisiting the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).

of the national security agenda, partly by insisting that networks rely on retired intelligence personnel and high ranking military officers for TV commentary accurately presumed to be loyal adherents of the bipartisan consensus.

This dynamic of disempowerment in America is by no means comparable currently to state control over protest activity in a totalitarian state. The protests throughout the country following the police murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 were surprisingly widespread, even producing some transformative anti-racist initiatives. What went beyond most prior reactions against racism were the widespread societal acceptance of even radical expressions of anti-racist symbolic politics, especially on the part of athletes, but also including displays of sympathetic solidarity from elected political officials at lower levels of governments, including city mayors and some senior police officials. CNN also adopted a position during the pandemic that departed from impartiality by exhibiting consistent sharp criticism of the Trump law and order responses to the calls for police accountability and racial justice, as well as to the pandemic.

This kind of unrest created pretexts for the Trump presidency to exhibit its law and order preferences in responding to these displays of protest and anti-racism, and to launch renewed attacks on the liberal media. Not only were demonstrations and protest dealt with by government decreed reliance on excessive force coupled with sharp rebukes to local and state officials that expressed sympathy with the calls for reform. As well, opportunities were given to the Trump leadership to express its solidarity with the police, with citizen gun owners, and even with white supremacists. How this political split worked out as an electoral issue revealed to some extent the balance of political forces in American society. It showed whether Trump was more successful in scaring middle class urban and suburban America than Biden was in reassuring the citizenry that racial justice can be reconciled with secure neighborhoods, anti-looting regulation, and police protection throughout the country.

A further challenge in post-election America, regardless of who won, is to extend the re-empowerment of democracy beyond the anti-racism agenda to policy issues bearing on climate change, global militarism, predatory capitalism, health care, education. It is also possible that a Trump second term will be seized on as an opportunity to disempower a dissenting citizenry more than ever while simultaneously energizing pro-regime militants to disrupt peaceful protest activity.

### **(5) Repudiating 'Enlightenment Morality'**

The label of 'Enlightenment Morality' is intended to call attention to the extent to which modernity has rested on respect for science-based knowledge and reliance on evidence-based instrumental reason. Trump has repeatedly repudiated such core ideas of the modern world, relying instead for policy preferences based on self-serving political expediency, and expressed through a disregard, even contempt, for evidence and expert opinion. In some historical circumstances, such a regressive epistemology might not have serious societal consequences, but under current conditions it functions as a disastrous form of denialism in relation to health and environmental challenges, already responsible beyond a reasonable doubt for the deaths of tens of thousands of utterly innocent persons whose lives had been placed needlessly in jeopardy.

These issues of the nature of knowledge are fundamental to our sense of reality, and underlies the cultural capacity to distinguish truth from falsity. The great contribution of the Enlightenment was often seen to be emancipating humanity from superstition and 'revealed' truth, and basing action and policy on evidence and empirical validation (Atzamon 2017).<sup>19</sup> Progress by way of technological innovation was seen as a vindication of such modes of knowing, and providing a foundation for the continuous enhancement of daily life and longevity. True, modernity was long virtually blind when it came to assessing a variety of dark sides of allowing scientific inquiry to serve as a guide to human behavior, perhaps initially epitomized by the development of nuclear weaponry (Schell 1982; Andersson and Dahlgren 2019).<sup>20</sup>

On the one side is the Trump affection for less educated persons and his contentions that facts and evidence that challenge his preferences are based on 'fake news.' On the other side, is the Swedish teenager, Greta Thunberg's plea that political leaders 'listen to the scientists' or her indictment of UN diplomats by asserting 'you will die of old age. I will die from global warming.' And then beyond the debate is the need for a balance between respect for science and the application of the Precautionary Principle, which includes the recognition that technological innovations should be evaluated and prudently regulated with due regard to their ethical, ecological, and humanistic effects. Without such appraisals robotics, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and automation threaten our future as aggressively as does Trump's denialism.

Against this background, our future as a species depends on neither rejecting the finding of science with respect to health, ecological wellbeing, and learning nor mindlessly adopting the view that whatever science enables technology to do should be done. We need ethics of restraint and supportive regulatory authority as much as truth and respect for facts to cope humanely with the complexities of the contemporary world, which finds itself in the midst of an as yet undiagnosed bio-ecological-ethical crisis that imperils civilization, societal decency, and even survival (Falk 2017).

For democracy to flourish amid such complexity presupposes that humanistic as well as skill-oriented educational excellence becomes a national priority. Finding the path that makes proper use of scientific truth while respecting ethical and ecological constraints depends upon a certain level of political sophistication that is currently absent from the U.S. political landscape. The argument for investing more in education is usually framed in terms of not falling behind the Chinese, but even more compelling, is appreciating this need for a techno-humanistic equilibrium to achieve ecologically sustainable modes of collective existence, what Jacques Derrida has in mind with the phrase 'living well together.' (Weber 2012)

## **(6) Disenfranchising the World**

A final concern involves the disenfranchisement of the peoples of the world. I would maintain that a legitimate U.S. democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should enlarge its writ to heed the political

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<sup>19</sup> Gilad Atzmon on the relationship between reason (Athens) and revelation (Jerusalem) clarifies this deep-rooted debate about truth and reality.

<sup>20</sup> There are many versions of the problematique of modernity, including those that stress the Promethean myth, hubris, overlooking limits, embracing nuclearism.

will of those who reside beyond the territorial boundaries of the country and owe traditional allegiances to another country. These foreigners are deeply affected by the extra-national influence exerted by the United States on their lives and livelihood, and yet are without representation or any means to register formal approval or disapproval. The U.S. by virtue of its global reach, mainly through a network of military bases, naval forces patrolling the high seas, claims based on cyber and space security, and diplomatic leverage, often has more impact on foreign societies than their own government.

Should not consideration be given to some form of non-territorial enfranchisement (not necessarily a full and equal vote) that is more congruent with the realities of a networked, digital world than is the territorial sovereign state? It is time that we deploy our moral and political imagination to envision non-territorial democracy that takes account of geopolitical configurations of power as well as ecosystems that cannot function properly if subject to no source of governance with precedence over the claims of national sovereignty. The statist territoriality of life on the planet has declined to the point where only multi-leveled democratic governance can hope to address humanely the multiple and diverse challenges directed at humanity as a whole. Europe has pioneered such a development on a regional level, and although paused at present, exhibits existential strivings toward new forms of political community and regional scales of governance oriented around the promotion of regional public goods.

Such considerations can be taken into account in a number of ways other than through giving a vote to foreigners in American elections. One approach would be to create a kind of global parliament that interacted not only with the UN but with national governments, especially those with geopolitical roles or for starters, that endowed with a right of veto by the UN Charter. Another would be the selection of regional and global ombudsmen to represent global and regional interests within statist governance structures.

## **Coda**

In essence, we cannot be hopeful about the future unless we commit ourselves to the hard work of *detritorializing democracy, demilitarizing the state, pacifying geopolitics, (re)empowering people, and strengthening the United Nations and international law. As well, time as well as space must become integral elements of national, transnational, regional, and global policy formation and problem-solving. This means that short-termism must be supplanted by time horizons that are congruent with the nature of global challenges, and the Precautionary Principle is given priority over the quest for capital efficiencies, technological innovations, and "high risk uncertainties"* (Falk 2019).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The Precautionary Principle was inserted in various conference declarations relating to environmental protection, but its relevance is wider to all undertakings that pose serious risks of harm.

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