

Trumpism and Its Factions

Existential Threats to America's Democracy

By Frank G. Splitt

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*The experience is shattering. How much stupidity! What delusion among such cultured and actually clever people! Just unconditional belief in the Führer, delight that 'finally our weapons speak'!*¹
—Erich Ebermayer, September 3, 1939

ABSTRACT -- This commentary follows a previous piece that was published as a *Daily Herald* Guest View and headlined “The lessons of the past need to be remembered today.” It dealt with factions that are now dividing America just as was feared by our founding fathers. Here the focus is on Trumpism and its related factions, composed of a number of elements foremost of which is the Trump loyalist faction. It argues that it is the combination of President Trump’s polarizing rhetoric and the Trumpist faction that divides America, a serious threat to America’s democracy. It concludes by saying moderates from both political parties must work to find common ground to reunite America. A divided America cannot stand.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION – In a previous paper,² I discussed factional forces that could lead to a political crackup in America. As if on cue, a related column³ by Ms. Ayaan Hersi Ali focused on two ideological factions with a view towards illuminating what these quite different factions have in common.

The factions considered by Ali in her analysis were rooted in the ideologies of Islamism and Wokeism, a term she coined to include things like cancel culture, social justice, critical race theory, and intersectionality that were considered in the previous paper.

IDEOLOGICAL FACTIONS – Ali found that both ideologies “aim to tear down the existing system and replace it with utopias that always turn out to be hellish anarchies” and that both “are collectivist: Group identity trumps the individual. Both tolerate—and often glorify—violence carried out by zealots.” She also found that members of these factions share the following salient attributes:

- 1) Relentless pursuit of ideological purity
- 2) Certainty in the belief of the absolute rightfulness of their cause

In view of the above, it was of interest to inquire as to the existence of what might be called the opposite of Wokeism—an overarching set of right-wing ideological factions that matches these attributes. There is no need to look any further than Trumpism for the answer.

TRUMPISM – For the record, Trumpism, as defined in Wikipedia, “is a political ideology and style of government which was specifically developed by President Donald Trump. It resembles the philosophy of recent right-wing conservative - neonationalist or national-populist movements in western democracies.”⁴

However, a more reality-based definition was given by Ron Christie, a Republican analyst, who worked in the White House of President George W. Bush. Christie said Trumpism is “what the president believes on any particular moment on any particular day about any particular subject.”⁵ By virtue of this

definition, Trumpism will necessarily include a wide variety of divisive elemental factions—often with overlapping grievances and objectives. Taken together, these elemental factions form the so-called Trump base of mostly working-class white voters.

THE TRUMP LOYALISTS – Foremost among these elemental factions are the Trump-loyalists. Members of this faction have cult-like, unconditional belief in Trump, their leader. For insight to the phenomenon of unconditional belief, see the epigraph and Note 1. For example, this would include belief in his only partially true claim that “Unlike so many who came before me, I keep my promises.”⁶

Trump loyalists are chagrined by the fact that President Trump has likely had more invective and hatred strewn on him by the FBI, the Justice Department, the media, the Democrats, the never-Trump Republicans, trusted aides, federal district-court judges and ex-military brass than any president in modern history. His loyal followers cannot accept the countering fact that the president's well publicized erratic, wrathful, and shameful personal behavior, before and after his election, has consequences such as evoking "the invective and hatred strewn upon him." These Trump loyalists are precisely the people he must have had in mind when he claimed that he could "stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody" and not "lose any voters."

Trump's polarizing, anything-goes style of leadership, no matter how bizarre or unbecoming of the presidency, is accepted by his loyal followers as is his deviation from presidential norms and traditions. So too is lying, denying, and blaming others to avoid taking responsibility for his action or inaction. This can only happen if otherwise intelligent people willfully suspend any moral judgement and succumb to their self-interests. Some loyalists rationalize this behavior by focusing on what they call substance rather than style and character—separating his policies that are to their liking from his personality traits that they may detest as bad and deplorable.

Mental separation leaves Trump loyalists free to vote against the opposition that their leader paints as radical-left, anti-police, socialist baby-killers. Some loyalists claim that they are not really voting for Trump but rather for other things. In an email message I received from a Trump supporter titled “I'm not voting for Trump,” these other things were: the Second Amendment, the next Supreme Court Justice, secure borders, every unborn soul, the Electoral College, the police, law and order, freedom of speech and religion, the American flag, the American Dream, good and against evil, the future of my country.

THE TRUMPIST FACTION – In light of the above, members of the Trump-loyalist faction can be found in one or more of other elemental Trumpist factions in the following representative listing:

Law-and-order – Members believe America is in dire peril---plagued by lawlessness, poverty, and violence, constantly under threat, and at great risk of being driven into Socialism by the radical left.

Anti-Immigration – Members advocate for Trump's border wall with some even opposing legal immigration.

Anti-Public School – Members are pro-choice, advocate for charter schools, and bash teachers unions.

Anti-globalism – Members believe America is suffering from economic angst. Americanism, not globalism is their credo.

Pro-gun – Members fiercely defend 2nd Amendment rights.

Anti-abortion – Members are primarily composed of Evangelical Christians and far-right, Anti-Pope Francis Catholics that claim Godless Dems will go to hell.⁷

Climate-denier – Members reject the proposition that climate change is occurring and is a global threat caused by human activity. They believe it's a hoax.

Racist – Members reject the idea that systemic racism exists in America. They include open and closeted white supremacists.

Monetary – Members believe Trump will do everything he can to increase their wealth including the elimination of as many as possible of existing rules and regulations.

Pro-Israel – Members are single-issue Trump voters.

Judicial – Members advocate for conservative judges.

Health-care – Members aim to repeal, defund, or weaken the Affordable Care Act.

Hoax & Conspirator – Members believe something is a hoax, fake news, and/or a conspiracy if Trump says it is, no matter how many times he has been proven wrong.

Tax – Members believe they and/or their businesses are over taxed.

There is only one thing in the lives of men, nations and countries that is without price. That thing is honor.—Józef Beck, Polish foreign minister, 1939

A DEVELOPING THREAT – Noteworthy is the fact that there are no things in the above listing that are related to national honor. Driven by President Trump and Trumpist factions, the Republican Party appears to be in the process of transforming itself into an authoritarian institution, an existential threat to America’s democracy. This transformative process is aided and abetted by Trump’s powerful allies: Attorney General William Barr in the U.S. Department of Justice and Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in the U.S. Senate.

Barr, a far-right Catholic and proponent of the theory of the unitary executive, not only believes the president has the power to control the entire executive branch of the U.S. government, but is also using the Department of Justice to support his 2020 Reelection Campaign’s “law-and-order” strategic initiative. McConnell, on the other hand was a harsh critic of Trump prior to his 2016 election. After the election, Trump promptly appointed McConnell’s wife, Elaine Chao, as U.S. Secretary of Transportation. It should come as no surprise that McConnell is now an all-in Trump loyalist who provides unwavering support for the president’s agenda, particularly with regard to appointments to the federal judiciary.

Apparently, the Trump Republican Party seeks not to preserve American democracy but to undermine it, if not destroy it, by such tactics as spreading disinformation, gerrymandering congressional districts, and hindering the voting process by crippling the operation of the U.S. Postal Service.

OBSERVATIONS – The president’s polarizing political rhetoric draws both Wokeist and Trumpist extremists stimulating protests and creating disturbing headlines for the media. Wokeist motivations and grievances are ideological, not merely economic. Therefore, they won’t be satisfied with more entitlements. The Trumpist faction will only be satisfied with gaining and maintaining more power via the president’s reelection.

President Trump, a faithful student of Roy Cohn, his disgraced attorney and teacher, will likely continue to employ Cohn’s modus operandi of lying, denying, and blaming that has proven to be so successful during his first term.

He has recently praised Marjorie Taylor Green, the Republican candidate nominated for Georgia’s 14th congressional district and promoter of QAnon, a right-wing domestic terror group. Trump has also named politically conservative senators and judges as potential appointees to the Supreme Court and will certainly amplify his anti-abortion rhetoric so as to keep evangelical Christians and conservative Catholics in his fold.

Trump’s enthusiastic loyalist supporters will likely continue to ignore the following facts: the U.S. is

currently the world leader in COVID-19 disease deaths that can be attributed to the administration's bungled response—the president's lack of leadership and politicalized obsessive focus on his reelection; a large number of true American patriots resigned or were fired; promised manufacturing jobs in the Midwest decreased rather than increased; tax cuts benefited the wealthy and corporations; climate change is not a hoax, nevertheless the administration continues to roll back more than 90 EPA rules and regulations to favor industry at the expense of human health and the environment; and America is more deeply polarized than it was before the 2016 presidential election.

It would seem that it matters not a whit to Trump's loyal supporters that America has not only lost its position as the world leader, but has also lost its national honor. To explore what America has already lost, and what it still may lose, see *The American Crisis*⁸ and *Creating Our Common Future*.⁹

CONCLUDING REMARKS – Reflection on all of above, leads to the following question: Has Trumpism made America great again or has it made it less so? The question should be answered by each and every voting American come November 3, 2020. Thus, the American electorate finds itself at a defining, if not perilous, moment in our nation's history.

Like Ayaan Hersi Ali, I cling to the hope that most Americans are still willing as a nation to fight and, if necessary, to die to preserve our freedoms, our rights, our customs, and our history as imperfect as it happens to be.

Hope for a viable future of America's democracy will depend on the outcome of the 2020 election that will, in turn, rely on a well-informed electorate that can help place experienced as well as competent and trustworthy men and women at all levels of government no matter their political affiliation.

Trumpism and its related factions have deepened the divide in America. Moderates from both political parties must work to find common ground to reunite America. A divided America cannot stand.

NOTES

1. Ebermayer, a German liberal intellectual, made these remarks after an encounter with aristocratic neighbors who, as Hitler-loyalists, expressed boundless uncritical faith in their leader. The encounter was on the day Britain and France went to war with Germany after it invaded Poland. See pages 368-69 of Frederick Taylor's book *1939: A People's History of the Coming of the Second World War* (Norton, 2020).

2. Splitt, Frank G., "Factions Are Dividing America: A Divided America Cannot Stand," *FutureVectors*, August 17, 2020, <http://www.futurevectors.com/Odyssey/Splitt%20-%20Factions.pdf>
This essay was based on a previous commentary "A Divided America Cannot Stand" that was published by the *Daily Herald* on August 24, 2020 with the headline "The lessons of the past need remembering today," and posted online at <https://www.dailyherald.com/amp-article/20200824/discuss/200829798/>

3 Ali, Ayaan Hersi, "What Islamists and 'Wokeists' Have in Common," *The Wall Street Journal*, Opinion, September 11, 2020, page A17.

4. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trumpism

5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42738881>

6. Kristof, Nicholas, "I Keep My Promises,' Trump Said, Let's Check," *The New York Times*, Sept.6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/05/opinion/sunday/trump-promises-check.html>

7. Smietana, Bob, “Video from priest says Catholics who vote for Democrats will go to hell. One bishop approves this message,” *Religious News Service*, Sept.6, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2020/09/06/catholic-vote-democrats-go-to-hell-priest-james-altman-video-warns-bishop-stirckland/>
8. Goldberg, Jeffrey, Applebaum, Anne, et al, *The American Crisis*, Simon & Schuster, 2020.
9. Splitt, Frank G., *Creating Our Common Future, THE BENT of Tau Beta Pi*, Spring 1993, <http://www.futurevectors.com/Odyssey/Splitt%20-%20Common%20Future.pdf>

Afterword

The plan is not to win the popular (or even the electoral) vote, but rather to stay in power in some other way. Trump has spelled it out himself: he will declare victory regardless of what happens, expect state governments to act contrary to vote counts claim fraud from postal ballots, court chaos from white nationalists (and perhaps the Department of Homeland Security), and expect the Supreme Court to install him.—Timothy Snyder, October 8, 2020¹

INTRODUCTION – The purpose of this Afterword is to add new material to the original essay so as to build a more comprehensive and compelling story about the current existential threat to American Democracy outlined by Timothy Snyder in the epigraph.

I must first say that I am indebted to Dr. Diane Ravitch, a research professor of education at NYU and a former Assistant Secretary of Education, who helped promulgate the essay on threats to American Democracy.²

A DEVELOPING THREAT REVISITED – Attention is called to this essay section that read as follows:

The Republican Party appears to be in the process of transforming itself into an authoritarian institution, an existential threat to America’s democracy. This transformative process is aided and abetted by Trump’s powerful allies: Attorney General William Barr in the U.S. Department of Justice and Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in the U.S. Senate.

Barr, a far-right Catholic and proponent of the theory of the unitary executive, not only believes the president has the power to control the entire executive branch of the U.S. government, but is also using the Department of Justice to support his 2020 Reelection Campaign’s “law-and-order” strategic initiative. McConnell, on the other hand was a harsh critic of Trump prior to his 2016 election. After the election, Trump promptly appointed McConnell’s wife, Elaine Chao, as U.S. Secretary of Transportation. It should come as no surprise that McConnell is now an all-in Trump loyalist who provides unwavering support for the president’s agenda, particularly with regard to appointments to the federal judiciary.

Apparently, the Trump Republican Party seeks not to preserve American democracy but to undermine it, if not destroy it, by such tactics as spreading disinformation, gerrymandering congressional districts, and hindering the voting process by crippling the operation of the U.S. Postal Service.

Attorney General William Barr is now serving President Trump as a well-respected version of Roy Cohen, his infamous lawyer and mentor. Mr. Barr’s expansive view of presidential power allows the president to do just about anything he pleases under the protection of the U.S. Department of Justice—making the attorney general an existential threat to American Democracy as well as to the Catholic Church as envisioned by Pope Francis. He serves as an ideal complement to the Anti-Pope Francis

mission of conservative Catholic Cardinals such as New York's Cardinal Dolan.³ For a closer look at Mr. Barr's vision of an unfettered president, see Gehring.⁴

There have been troubling revelations with regard to the politicization of the departments in the Executive Branch of Government, specifically the DOJ, DHS, and DHHS (particularly at the CDC), as evidenced by obvious efforts to help President Trump in the upcoming election. For example, at the DHS, John Ratcliffe, Director of National Intelligence was reported to have ignored urgings from senior U.S. officials not to release information about Russian intelligence material containing unverified allegations about Hillary Clinton and the 2016 election.⁵ President Trump called attention to this unverified information as if were factual during the first presidential debate on September 29, 2020.

THE JUDICIAL BRANCH – The Senate's confirmation hearings on Amy Coney Barrett's nomination to the SCOTUS are of concern. If confirmed, President Trump would have a 6:3 lock on the Judicial Branch of government. And, not only that, but Barrett, like Attorney General William Barr and her mentor the late Antonin Scalia, believes in the theory of the unitary executive that allows for almost limitless presidential control of the entire executive branch. This presents a particularly dangerous situation given Trump's modus operandi of disruption, division, deceit and deception with disregard for America's democratic norms that include his disregard for decorum, honor, and just plain common decency.

In normal times and circumstances, Judge Amy Coney Barrett would appear to be an outstanding nominee for the U.S. Supreme Court. This despite concerns about her Catholic faith as well as concerns about her likely conservative positions on *Roe v. Wade* and the Affordable Care Act. However, these are not normal times and far from normal circumstances. Therefore, Judge Barrett's views on the theory of the unitary executive are of paramount importance to the survival of American Democracy

A question arises, to wit: If the Judicial is rendered ineffectual, who would there be to stop Trump from using the departments of the Executive Branch and department heads such as Ratcliffe, to support his personal and political aims?

WHAT'S AHEAD? – President Trump will do everything he can to get his nominee Amy Coney Barrett confirmed to the SCOTUS for the short-term purpose of increasing his odds for a favorable outcome in the election he will certainly contest if he loses. Two recent stories bear on this real existential threat to American Democracy.

The first is Barton Gellman's rather lengthily piece "The Election That Could Break America" from *The Atlantic*. "If the vote is close, Donald Trump could easily throw the election into chaos and subvert the result. Who will stop him?" says Gellman.⁶

The second story comes from *Salon*, headlined "Trump campaign discussing plans to appoint its own state electors, no matter the results: report" where "report" refers to Gellman's *Atlantic* story. "A real nightmare scenario: The eight closest battleground states might send competing sets of electors to Congress" writes the author⁷

Sadly, Trump loyalists likely believe the president would be doing this for them so as to further their personal wealth and one or more of their particular interests such as conservative judges, pro-birth, 2nd Amendment rights, law & order, white supremacy, anti-socialism, and anti-immigration. On the contrary, President Trump would be doing it for himself, as he fears the consequences of not being reelected

If not reelected, Mr. Trump would have to appear in courts as an ordinary citizen to face multiple litigations, see Snyder.¹ Therefore, everything will be done to get his nominee Amy Coney Barrett

confirmed for the short-term purpose of increasing his odds for a favorable outcome in the election that he will certainly contest if he loses.

TWO FINAL QUESTIONS – If the president has his way, who would be able to stop him from using all the levers of government to not only contest the results of the upcoming election if he loses, but also who would stop him from realizing his personal and political aims as well as his ambition if he wins either by votes cast or by a SCOTUS decision as in *Bush v. Gore*, 531 U.S. 98 (2000)?

Shades of Germany in the 1930s?

NOTES & WEB LINKS

1. Snyder, Timothy, "Not a Normal Election," *Commonweal Magazine*, Oct. 8, 2020, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/not-normal-election>
2. Ravitch, Diane, "Frank G. Splitt: Existential Threats to American Democracy," Oct. 1, 2020, <https://dianeravitch.net/2020/10/01/frank-g-splitt-existential-threats-to-american-democracy/>.
3. "Attorney General Barr Appears on Cardinal's Radio Show," <https://cny.org/stories/attorney-general-barr-appears-on-cardinals-radio-show,20503>
4. Gehring, John, "William Barr is a culture warrior Catholic," *The National Catholic Reporter*, Aug. 7-20, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/william-barr-nations-top-lawyer-culture-warrior-catholic>
5. October 1, 2020 PBS *NewsHour* at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/october-1-2020-pbs-newshour-full-episode> (The two segments of interest are as follows: 1) The release of unverified Russian intelligence sparks questions about politicization and 2) The risks of politicizing the US intelligence community.)
6. Gellman, Barton, "The Election That Could Break America," *The Atlantic*, Nov. 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/11/what-if-trump-refuses-concede/616424/>
7. Sollenberger, Roger, "Trump campaign discussing plans to appoint its own state electors, no matter the results: report," *Salon*, Oct. 6, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2020/10/06/trump-campaign-discussing-plans-to-appoint-its-own-state-electors-no-matter-the-results-report/>

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