# A Tale Of Two Debacles

In the United States, much societal dysfunction is clothed in pseudo-Progressive garb. Alas, such “woke” Neoliberalism has served as an elaborate distraction from class consciousness. The party duopoly in the U.S. entails an either/or contest between two entrenched political juggernauts: the Republicans and the Democrats. For many voters, this is a Sophie’s choice: In each electoral cycle, people are obliged to go with the less repulsive alternative. Which of those two parties advocates for universal public healthcare? Neither. Which is willing to flout corporate interests? Neither. Which is willing to get money out of politics altogether? Neither. It’s no wonder the 2016 and 2024 presidential elections turned out as they did.

Since 2016, America’s corporatists have been happy to see the Democratic party establishment go to war with MAGA (or, at least, allow the feud to be couched in these terms). For they know that, however each election turned out, they would ultimately prevail. Translation: So long as the choice is between the corporatist Democrats and the G.O.P., plutocracy wins.

With regard to the Democratic party, there remains the nagging question: What does it say about a political party that was defeated by a buffoon—and such an obvious con-man—twice? That such a party is feckless would be an understatement. In performing a post-mortem on Kamala Harris’ doomed

presidential run, we find that it was a variation on the same mistakes made by Hillary Clinton eight years earlier; and, to a lesser extent, by Joe Biden four years earlier.

The 2024 presidential election was a deafening wake-up call. More to the point, it served as corroboration of an incontrovertible yet oft-overlooked fact: Faux populism isn't vanquished by anti-populism; it can only be vanquished by real populism. Put another way: MAGA will thrive so long as the Democratic party only offers an alternate flavor of corporatism…while renouncing actual populism.

As it happens, it is a shrill minority on the so-called "Left" that gives the Progressive movement a bad name. Consequently, we genuine Progressives find ourselves in somewhat of a pickle. Those of us who criticize the Democratic party from the LEFT are effectively told: "Quit your bitchin'. It could be worse. So fall in line, take what you're being offered, and be thankful that it's less odious than the G.O.P." The DNC proffers a flattering version of Neoliberalism in lieu of a genuinely populist economic vision; so, in each election cycle, we are expected to bite the bullet and capitulate to their agenda.

The "at least we're not as bad as the Republicans" line is hardly inspiring. Far from galvanizing nascent activists, the insistence that we pick the lesser bad of two bad options soon becomes exasperating. No matter. Just as sure as the sun rises and sets, we are subjected to an un-ending barrage of messaging that is more off-putting than motivating. As if that weren't bad enough, much of the material only provides cover for the Democrats' sugar-coated corporatism.

In the wake of November 5, 2024, we can see one thing clearly: The cadre of Potemkin Progressives walking the halls of power have once again proven how truly out of touch they are with the common-man. Once the party of the working bloke, the Democratic party is now led by a gaggle of self-important operatives who issue edicts from the cozy sanctum of their lavishly-appointed parlors. With an ample amount of hand-waving, they deign to give their fatuous pontifications a shimmering, pseudo-Progressive gloss…even as they remain resolute in their service to their corporate paymasters.

The U.S. government is a veritable orgy of quid pro quos; and the Democratic party —infested with corporatists—is almost as guilty as the G.O.P. when it comes to legalized graft. After all, both parties are largely captured by corporate interests.

(When it comes to legislation, Capitol Hill is essentially a giant auction block.) The problem, then, is not that the working class let the politicians down; the problem is that the politicians let the working class down.

Taking a wider view of the Washington Beltway, we stand witness to political catastrophe. (Washington D.C. has always been a venue for back-room deals made between unscrupulous power-brokers. Now, oligarchs are swapping favors in between tee-offs at Mar-A-Lago; no back-rooms required.) Public officials no longer serve the public; they serve their big-money donors; so seek mutually-beneficial arrangements…even if it means screwing over everyone else. With skyrocketing socio-economic inequality, it has become abundantly clear that the Washington Consensus is no longer viable. Yet mainline Democrats offer no credible alternative to MAGA.

It is worth recognizing that, in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, the Democratic party had someone who could have handily prevailed over Trump. But instead of embracing Bernie Sanders, the party leadership castigated him; and—for good measure—ostracized his followers (dismissing them as “Bernie Bros” and secret misogynists). In doing so, they rebuffed the most vital segment of the electorate: the working class. (But, hey, it made Lloyd Blankfein happy. So what’s the problem?)

How are we to make sense of this? As it turns out, establishmentarian Democrats despise Progressives even more than they despise MAGA. (One need only watch five minutes of MSNBC or CNN for this to be clear.) Their dirty little trick is to paint left-wing populists (actual populists) as right-wing populists (faux populists; the most extreme manifestation of whom are fascists); and then malign them both. This perfidious approach to politics is tremendously beneficial to the Democratic party establishment, as they hit two birds with one stone. Anyone who fails to support them is the enemy, so such people can all be thrown into the same vortex of derision.

Lost in this is a fundamental distinction—an obfuscation that creates misconceptions that further embroil us in pointless feuds. Faux populism is about appealing to the common man, even as it serves centers of power; genuine populism is about supporting what is actually good for the common man, even as it undermines centers of power. The difference is between placating the masses vs. empowering them. Right-wing populism (a.k.a. fascism) is about pretending to look out for the regular Joe, yet ultimately screwing him over. By stark contrast, “Left” populism

(a.k.a. Progressivism) is about actually looking out for the regular Joe. (Note: All demagogues—especially fascists—profess to be a "man of the people".) This brings to mind a famous line from the film, The American President. I paraphrase: "The people are so thirsty for leadership that they'll crawl through the desert toward a mirage. And even though there's no water there, they'll drink the sand—not because they're thirsty, but because they don't know the difference."

Corporatists in the Democratic party are happy to paint ALL populism as right-wing populism (in order to scare people away from genuine populism); while the MAGA movement is happy to paint themselves as populist (in order to earn the support of those seeking bold solutions). **{A}** Labeling the Regressive "Left" as the "far Left" is tremendously misleading, as it leaves the impression that what we need to do is ease up on demands for universal public healthcare (imperative)….rather than curtail demands to be politically correct (foolhardy). By mis-characterizing genuine Progressivism as "too far to the Left", we end up acquiescing to corporatism. Instead of rejecting identity politics, we abandon efforts to get money completely out of politics. In other words, we misdiagnose the debilitating dysfunctions of the Democratic party, and—in doing so—play right into the hands of the right wing.

So what happened in 2016 and 2024? In assaying these two electoral debacles, let's start with a basic truth. There are only two possible reasons anyone would consider—for even a moment—supporting Donald Trump: severe ignorance or severe iniquity. In other words: such a person is either egregiously misinformed or egregiously immoral. (If he/she is not one, he/she is—ipso facto—the other.) There is no other plausible explanation for throwing in one's lot with MAGA. This means that when decent people supported Trump (of which there were plenty), they did so because they were nescient. Meanwhile, when those who should have known better did so, it was because they were venal. **{B}** Alas, all we can do is address the former problem; as any attempt to "fix" the broken moral compass of others (plutocrats, bigots, Christian theocrats) is a quixotic venture. There's just no getting through to such people. (Addressing the rampant moral bankruptcy—and protracted intellectual stagnation—of modern society is another task for another day.) Fortunately, it is the former group that is far larger. So it is to this task, the attenuation of ignorance, that we turn here.

Such an endeavor can be accomplished primarily by generating awareness—something that requires a compelling narrative (spec. one that effectively counteracts right-wing agit-prop). Said narrative cannot presume that the audience is well-informed. Pursuant to the presidential election of 2024, we have once again

learned that we should never underestimate how incredibly low-information America's most low-information voters actually are. **{C}** Pace iniquitous actors (the incidence of which was significant yet not determinative), how well- / ill-informed someone happened to be was—by far—the best predictor of MAGA support. Consider three befuddling disconnects:

**ONE:** Even as pro-choice sentiment increased across the general population, support for the anti-choice presidential candidate actually gained support amongst women—including self-professed pro-choice voters.

**TWO:** Even as people are more fed-up than ever with rampant corruption, support for a man who is—by far—the most flagrantly corrupt politician in the nation's history went UP.

**THREE:** Even as most people are sick and tired of "elites" not looking out for the interests of the working class, they opted to back a man who off-shored hundreds of thousands of jobs (think of the UAW workers who supported Trump even as he sent many of their jobs to Mexico)…and then passed tax-cuts that almost-exclusively benefited the ultra-wealthy.

What in heaven's name is going on here? Well, as it turns out, due to a confluence of heightened emotion (primarily: frustration) and mental lethargy, many Americans have been swept up in MAGA fervor. It is their lizard brains, not their critical faculties, that have guided them. Moreover, many of those who are ignorant are not interested in learning. Such people will tend to not be receptive when inconvenient truths—no matter how incontrovertible—are brought to their attention. (This goes especially for facts that do not accord with the conclusions on which they have already settled.) Rather than set their ego aside and modify their views, the Dunning-Kruger effect takes hold. Consequently, they will plant their flag and dig in their heels. Such obstinacy is chilling to contemplate; yet we must deal with the world we have, not with the world we wish he had. Unfortunately, this is how most people operate. Why? In the advent of social media's domination of our daily lives, intellectual curiosity is becoming increasingly rare; attention spans increasingly short; and intellectual courage more a liability than an asset.

So the question is: Given this set of exigencies, what are we to do?

Amongst those of us who (ostensibly) espouse Progressive ideals, there was a monumental miscalculation regarding the degree to which resentment—unmediated by critical reflection—often translates to irrationality. This miscalculation also failed

to factor in the degree to which tantalizing optics take precedence over substance. Many (including the present author) underestimated how capriciously many will throw in their lot with a bumbling fool…sheerly out of spite.

It is no coincidence that, when it came to a demographic breakdown of voter choice, the Democrats bled support from people of color (especially with Latino men). How does this make sense? The most salient disparity in the 2024 election was not race; it was college educated vs. uneducated. I point this out not to disparage those without higher education, but to make sense of those who fell for the MAGA sales-pitch. People without a solid education often lack the exposure to (even basic) knowledge about the wider world; and tend to be deficient in (even basic) critical thinking skills. This is not to say that graduate degrees are requisite for erudition. (Plenty of morons have an expensive sheepskin—framed in mahogany—hanging on their wall.) It is simply to say that those who are more provincial-minded are far more susceptible to being swindled by Trump's pseudo-populist ramblings.

The solution: Don't shame such voters for being uneducated; educate them. That is: Proactively take measures to ensure they are better informed. Awareness-generation is an integral part of activism; so there is nothing earth-shattering in this recommendation. The key point is that many working-class Americans are drawn to faux populism—and thus MAGA—under the mistaken impression that Trump is looking out for them.

It is imperative that such people be disabused of this grave misimpression. In 2024, Kamala Harris lost the presidential election largely because she left the average Joe with little confidence that she sincerely cared about his travails. In effect, she did / said virtually nothing to allay his concerns about the elevated prices of groceries, gas, housing, medical care, or anything else. Instead of promising to stop sending truckloads of taxpayer money to Ukraine and Israel (which most Americans were adamantly against), she trotted out celebrities, CEO endorsements, and even Liz Cheney. This was not only a grave misreading of the electorate, it was a strategic blunder of epic proportions.

MAGA gimmickry may be a shell game; yet it involves an easily-digestible, compelling narrative. This explains why it has captivated many of those who were frantically looking for clarity during trying times. Throw in a scapegoat, and presto! A convenient way to channel pent-up angst. "Never mind Blackstone; it's those pesky Brown people receiving medical assistance who are driving up housing prices!" The Harris campaign did nothing to dispel such misapprehensions; and did

very little to address the underlying problem. “Dog-gone it! Those undocumented immigrants are putting undue strain on an already-strained healthcare system.” Pay no heed to the fact that it is strained because it is over-privatized; and could handle the demand were it socialized. “And we’re fed up with all the petty crime!” Pay no heed to the fact that undocumented immigrants commit crime at a lower rate than native born citizens. Instead, just read “The Camp Of The Saints” and you’ll see that our ire should be directed not toward corporate power, but toward those who are seen as outsiders. (And while you’re at it, don’t forget to check out some Ayn Rand and Curtis Yarvin.)

One might say that the implied message of the Democratic party boiled down to the following: As you struggle to pay the bills, we’re going to send taxpayer money overseas to fund pointless wars…which only serves to divert federal outlays into the coffers of private military contractors. (Oh, and by the way, you’re a bigot if you think biological males with gender dysphoria should be allowed to compete against biological females in sports.) Say Democratic operatives: We’ll serve our corporate paymasters; but just not the same ones as the G.O.P. Plus, haven’t you heard that we don’t like racism?

We should not be entirely surprised that all the stage-managed pomp—and endless virtue-signaling—by the Regressive “Left” did nothing to stanch the attrition of support amongst p.o.c. In fact, such antics likely CONTRIBUTED to that attrition. When we assess Trump’s 2024 triumph vis-a-vis the two previous elections, we find that it was not so much that he gained support amongst non-p.o.c.; it’s that legions of rankled p.o.c. migrated to the MAGA movement…by default. (We encounter a similar problem with the working class IN GENERAL: a precipitous erosion of support for the Democrats since Obama.) Translation: A regiment of political correctness and identity politics did far more harm than good. This is not simply about losing elections; it’s about losing THE ELECTORATE.

But wait. What of the beguiling appeal of a man who is not only a demagogue, but a known con-man; and—to be frank—a buffoon? From the extensive testimonials of his fawning supporters, the thinking was roughly as follows: “He hates ‘the system’ just like I do. And—like me—he is derided for it by all those polished Washington insiders (in concert with a phalanx of pompous media elites). There’s gotta be something to it.”

In other words: The average Joe could relate to him. For many, Trump's bombastic style worked in his favor, as it made him seem more like an outsider…instead of just another over-rehearsed politician, reciting talking-points from an assigned script. Here was a man who's willing to break the rules in order to get things done. His brashness was taken as an indication that he was a no-nonsense, shoot-from-the-hip kinda guy. A man of action. The key: He was UNSCRIPTED, so seemed to mean what he said. Rather than the twaddle of a bumbling fool, Trump's semi-coherent asseverations were seen by some as the bold statements of a fearless leader. Trump's swooning fanbase mused, "Gosh-golly. Nobody can tell THIS guy what to do!" They failed to realize that anyone who buys him off tells him what to do.

But why the preponderance of such shoddy judgement throughout the polity?

The Trump-ification of our culture has amounted to a program of glamorized derangement—whereby charismatic speakers are able to capitalize on the ever-present proclivity for mass hysteria. **{D}** As a consequence, the veneration for gilded depravity is rampant.

Like any other corrupt politician, Trump's motivation is self-aggrandizement, not civic duty. This poses little problem; as today's politicians rise and fall due to OPTICS rather than the credence of their claims. It was his remarkable ability to MAKE IT SEEM as though he was looking out for the average Joe that enabled Trump to earn the good graces of so many.

And so it went: Even as everything he does serves only the socio-economic elite, Trump made himself seem RELATABLE.

Pointing out this hoodwink is no easy task; as entrancing people is one thing; breaking the trance is another. (As Mark Twain noted, it is easier to fool a man than to tell him that he's being fooled.) Amongst the rank and file, many are inveigled into construing their subjugation as a kind of emancipation. It was only a matter of time before many disaffected Americans were persuaded that throwing their lot in with MAGA was the best way to stick it to "the Establishment". Little did they realize that Trump and his ilk were only interested in enriching their cronies…while robbing the country blind.

The tendency for so many to succumb to—what is effectively—political Stockholm Syndrome is as profound as it is baffling. This susceptibility can be attributed—in large part—to the fact that most voters do not base their choices on a fastidious evaluation of policy. Rather, they base their choices on overall vibes—which is to

say: BRANDING (and the emotive response it elicits). Here's the catch: Emotion is not evoked based on an accurate picture of the world. Rather, it is guided solely by personal impressions…brought to bear on all the hopes and fears people harbor. This paves the way for folly. For in America's dyspeptic heartland, the rank and file is still grappling with the fallout from a half-century of candy-coated Neoliberalism. In the midst of their bewilderment, many have been duped into believing that the salve for their woes is…..MORE corporatism. For clearly all that "Left-ist" clap-trap isn't working.

Since Machiavelli, it has been understood that politics is about taking control of the narrative—which means managing the impressions people have of things (see Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, and Kim Il-Sung). Leo Strauss understood this and encouraged it. So did Henry Kissinger. Hence their brand of "Realpolitik". (Noam Chomsky understood this too. The difference is that he rang the alarm bells; as he did in **Manufacturing Consent** and **Necessary Illusions**.) Emotional manipulation is a matter of knowing what triggers people to react to their circumstances in certain ways. The idea is to then ensure they are presented with whatever stimuli will elicit the desired response. In other words: It's knowing how to "push people's buttons".

How can this be done? In a word: conditioning. Conditioned responses are about creating associations (by dictating what impressions people have when they encounter certain things—be it high inflation or the scent of lavender). So, in politics, presentation trumps substance. For, at the end of the day, it is personal impressions—not sound judgement—that determines most voters' decisions. Consequently, political success is more about savvy branding (which is largely about instantiating certain associations, no matter how illusory) than it is about objective merit.

In this sense, politicians find themselves operating in a marketplace rather than in an agora; and voters are more consumers than they are participants in deliberative democracy. They're shopping around for whichever product most tantalizes their fancy…while avoiding brands that carry any negative stigmas. Choices are made not rationally, but based on how enticing an image happens to be. Objective reality is beside the point. Create the right FEELING, and even the most toxic stake-oil will fly off the shelves.

The best way to manipulate people is to keep them from noticing that they are being manipulated. (The best way to control people is to convince them that they're not being controlled.) That's why the illusion of empowerment is far more effective than (overt) disempowerment. This is how religion works; and it is how agit-prop works. The results of both the 2016 and 2024 presidential elections were jolting reminders of how powerful propaganda can truly be (see hasbara in Israel; Juche in North Korea; xuanchuan in China). **{C}** Both elections were political catastrophes; and we court continued disaster if we allow those in the Democratic party who were responsible for both outcomes to offer an errant diagnosis of the problem; and thereby dictate the plan going forward.

Who are the easiest people to manipulate? Those who are frustrated and/or insecure. Mental lethargy makes this all the more easy; which means a gormless population is an ideal mark for aspiring demagogues. (Since time immemorial, tyrants have seized upon a simple truth: One is best able to manipulate people through anger and fear.) The moral of the story: Only when there is a yawning vacuum of critical thinking—and mechanisms are in place to ensure widespread mis-information—is something like MAGA possible.

And so it went: In 2024, rather than simply Googling "what causes inflation?" or "what effect do higher tariffs have on prices?" or "who benefited most from Trump's 2017 tax-cuts?", many Americans simply went with a functionally-illiterate nincompoop who **seemed** to give a shit about their financial woes; and proposed audacious solutions. He talked tough; and seemed unafraid to speak his mind. In the minds of many, that was enough to pass muster.

Aside from overactive limbic systems and inert pre-frontal cortexes, many people are simply suckers for a good story. So it is a compelling narrative (rather than a firm grasp of policy implications) that ultimately swayed them. With this in mind, the Democratic party now needs to ask: What led us to this moment? The problem, though, is that introspection is not, exactly, the DNC's strong suit. People are looking for bold solutions; and the party's feckless leaders have no idea how to deliver.

In the midst of these circumstances, Progressives should be careful not to be consumed with resentment and bitterness. We must maintain level heads; and work diligently to get to the bottom of things. Despondency gets us nowhere. Even as

we may be dismayed by recent events, any Progressive worth his/her salt needs to stand by the foundational principles of civil society. Capitulation makes one LESS appealing, not more appealing.

Step one is to reject identity politics wholesale. Why? Well, for starters, the cosmopolitan ideal offers the most promising vision for the United States. Don't forget that purportedly "anti-racist" identitarians obdurately claim that all White men are inherently—and irredeemably—racist / sexist. They rant about "White privilege" and "cultural appropriation"; and insist that we all use daffy terminology (like "menstruating / birthing person" when referring to women). They then proceed to castigate anyone who neglects to use plural pronouns for gender non-binary individuals. (Wonder how off-putting all this is? Consider the tagline for the most-run—and most successful—Trump ad of 2024: "She's for they/them; he's with you.") It's almost as if Potemkin Progressive were looking for the most surefire way to get as many people in America's rank and file as possible to say, "Go fuck yourself."

Never mind any of that, though. Potemkin Progressives have an ideological agenda to pursue, as well as big-money donors to appease; so they won't be deterred.

Putting oneself in the shoes of the average, working-class bloke, we are obliged to wonder: If one is racking one's brain about how to cover exorbitant medical bills, it's hard to take someone seriously who is obsessing over pronoun usage. The economic travails of most Americans must be front and center. So those who prioritize identity politics will be sure to never resonate with voters. "You may be struggling to keep up with the rent, to make car payments, and to feed your family, but we'll ensure you're castigated for cultural appropriation."

Identity politics ends up becoming an elaborate distraction, diverting our attention away from the actual explanation for social injustices—to wit: the increasingly high concentration of wealth / power in so few hands. (It doesn't matter what color those hands happen to be; it is the aggregation that is the problem.) While the well-positioned few hoard the fruits of the nation's economic activity, the rabble devolves into a cacophony of quibbling between identity groups.

The identitarian mindset tells us nothing about the cartels that bilk us each and every day—from big Pharma to big Oil. As the socio-economic elite feast at their sumptuous banquet, the rest of us fight each other over the table scraps; then blame each other when things don't work out well. For, you see, OUR financial woes are the fault of THE OTHER (i.e. a scapegoat, strategically defined in terms of a

convenient demographic category). This stratagem is straight out of the oligarch's playbook. "Pay no attention to the financiers gaming the system; it's those dastardly foreigners who are responsible for all our woes."

We are led to believe that our plight has nothing to do with the architecture of society's major power structures: the depredations of the for-profit sickness-treatment industry, the racket that is the prison-industrial complex, the malefaction of the gun lobby, the control over our food by gargantuan agricultural conglomerates, the stranglehold that private military contractors have over Capitol Hill, and the outsized influence of the financial services industry on the world's economic machinery. No. We must focus our ire instead on those who are different from us. Never mind the rent-seekers who've rigged the system for their own benefit…at everyone else's expense. That dark-skinned fellow trimming the hedges is receiving medical support? Let's blame him! Inflation is at unacceptable levels? It's because too many people of color are receiving food stamps!

Racial animus—coupled with outdated stigmas about poverty—keeps us all divided. This goes both ways. While some WASPs don't always want to listen to p.o.c., there are some p.o.c. who refuse to listen to Progressives if they happen to be WASPs. It is remarkable the degree to which people cannot see how alterity is a two-way street. (Bigotry in one direction is not cancelled out by pointing it in the other direction.) With their endless supply of supercilious discourse, Potemkin Progressives have become extremely proficient in alienating large swaths of the electorate…in a bumbling attempt to attract large swaths of the electorate.

So here we are. While weighing in on the issue of social (spec. racial) injustice, the Regressive "Left" touts a divisive program that would have many p.o.c. say things like, "Well, if it's coming from a White person, then I don't want to hear it." This obstreperous declaration has several variants—including:

• "You being White automatically makes you part of the problem." (The implication: "You are therefore disqualified from contributing to the discussion; and should accept the charge of guilt-by-association.")

• "If you're White, we'll insist that you have unfair 'privilege', no matter what your circumstances might be." (The implication: "Even if you are destitute, you are complicit in all racial injustice by dint of your racial identity; so you forfeit your right to weigh in on the matter.")

As I argued in my previous book, **Robin's Zugzwang**, this attitude is worse than un-productive; it is profoundly counter-productive. Not only is it detrimental to the Progressive cause; this tendentious posturing repels many of those who might otherwise be on board with Progressive policies.

Such a misguided approach is based on a grave misapprehension of racial injustice: what it is, how it works, and what causes it. In reality, the crux of the problem is structural, not personal; as we live in a society that is anti-meritocratic; and—more to the point—anti-meritocratic in favor of certain demographics (wealthy, White, Judeo-Christian men). Because of the skewed nature of America's institutions, belonging to this demographic intersection makes it far more probable that one will be in a position to benefit from unearned socio-economic status (a.k.a. "privilege"). But it does not follow from this that White-ness in and of itself is a privilege. For some it is; for many it's not. Holding everyone in the more statistically "privileged" demographic culpable for this inequitable state of affairs is tantamount to collective punishment. There is no more something wrong with being White than there is with being Brown or Black. Whiteness PER SE is not the problem; it's the system that favors it that's the problem.

I submit that with every diagnosis of social injustice, one must stipulate: "And although these structural defects adversely impact a disproportionate number of p.o.c., it is not ONLY p.o.c. who end up with a raw deal. Structural inequalities impact a lot of struggling White people as well." Until the Regressive "Left" learns this crucial lesson, it will continue to drive tens of millions of working-class WASPs into the arms of MAGA.

How, then, are we to make sense of structural inequalities that exist along racial lines? The point is not to blame White-ness per se; it is to recognize that not being a person of color makes the chances much higher that one will be granted opportunities that many p.o.c. don't have. Be that as it may, it is imperative that we recognize that this is not because of some nebulous thing called "Whiteness"… permeating society like a noxious aether. Rather, it is due to the grotesquely defective architecture of America's power structures, which determine who is granted avenues for success (access to affordable housing in safe neighborhoods, to quality education, to gainful employment, and to good healthcare). The unfairness is due to a SYSTEM (which has been set up to favor one demographic profile over another—from jurisprudence to career opportunities); not due to the level of melanin in any given person's epidermis.

So what are we to make of the faux populism that is MAGA? Recognizing the ominous parallels with fascism is important; but it only gets us so far.

If we are to ascertain the (actual) agenda espoused by Trump, we might consider a handy rule of thumb: Don't listen to what he says; heed a slightly different version of the old adage: **Follow the money** (which reveals ulterior motives and clandestine influences). So I recommend an alternative adage: **Follow the glee**. In other words: Amongst those with power, see who is happy that Trump won.

Question: On November 6, 2024, which big money donors were high five-ing? One will soon find the answer is as clear as day: a motley array of fascists—from unabashed ethno-nationalists to rapacious plutocrats. (Consider Trump's cabinet appointments. We find ourselves beholding a rogue's gallery of degenerates and lunatics—from Wall Street goons to "libertarian" tech bros.) Another question is worth posing: Which ideologues were offered cushy appointments in the administration? (Answer: Christian theocrats, Revisionist Zionists, anti-choice zealots, gun-nuts, and free-market fundamentalists.) During the fortnight following the election, Elon Musk's net worth increased by about $60 billion. This tells us much of what we need to know about what lay behind Trump's policy positions—to wit: who's interests those positions serve. (Hint: Not the 99%.)

On Capitol Hill, legislation has always been sold to the highest bidder; but, under Trump, the entire government is now up for sale. Consequently, as is the case with most plutocracies, the U.S. is steadily becoming a kakistocracy. (Note that "follow the glee" is a variation on the litmus test, "Cui bono?" In the case of Trump's re-election, the answer is: Evangelicals, Neocons, and Oligarchs.) Make no mistake, as every devastated Progressive was reeling in bewilderment in the weeks following the election, virtually every other client of Kamala's corporate consultation firms were popping champagne. (Thanks, West Exec Advisors, Bully Pulpit Interactive, Canal Partners, and Gambit Strategies.) But make no mistake: Whether or not [insert corporate Democrat here] or Trump prevailed, crypto-currency tycoons, private military contractors, rent-seekers, and foreign oligarchs would be laughing all the way to the bank.

Meanwhile, many on the putative "Left" still find themselves embroiled in petty squabbles—fussing over "micro-aggressions", "trigger warnings", and "safe spaces". When they see such Tomfoolery, corporatist Democrats are eager to play along. Their reaction is essentially: "Go ahead. By all means, tie yourselves in knots over political correctness and identity politics. Just don't demand universal public

healthcare.  And, by the way, you know that we're one of the good guys, because we've convened yet another D.E.I. workshop.  The result may still be a plutocracy; but–hey–at least the plutocrats are more ethnically diverse."  Though unintended, the Harris campaign's pleas to the electorate amounted to the following: "Even though we are not delivering for you nearly enough, we expect you to deliver for us in the voting booth…because, hey, at least we're slightly less corrupt than the horrifically corrupt alternative."

This is hardly an enticing proposition.  One may as well announce: "What we'll do is…we'll ease up a bit on the corporatism; but we'll then throw in some identity politics; and insist that everyone be politically correct.  So that should keep everyone placated."

It's a wonder that anyone still finds the Democratic party appealing.

Those who normally vote Democrat have to start asking: Who serves who when party bosses expect constituents to fall in line rather than vice versa?  In light of its manifold depredations, it is not entirely surprising how much credibility the Democrats have lost with America's working class.

The most pressing question NOW is: How did this faltering party alienate so many otherwise gettable voters?  Rather than a party of (real) populists, it has become a party of Wall Street bankers, toadies for the bloated military-industrial complex, and shills for the grossly-inefficient for-profit sickness-treatment industry (PhRMA, AHIP, the AHA, etc.)  As if that weren't disgraceful enough, terrified of being accused of "anti-Semitism", many with a (D) next to their name have cozied up to Revisionist Zionists just to stay in the good graces of AIPAC (and the foot-soldiers at DMFI)… even though doing so means endorsing genocide.  So many mainline Democrats have been willing to endorse crimes against humanity in faraway lands in order to avoid censure by the Israel lobby.

This makes them look obsequious, not intrepid. **{E}**

Will the devastating election result in 2024 be a wake-up call to the Democratic establishment?  Sadly, probably not.  After all, the Democratic party is now primarily a corporatist party—a lamentable fact that has been demonstrated time and time again.  The DLC and its well-coiffed sycophants have made crystal clear that they have nothing but contempt for genuine Progressives.  Why?  Because genuine

populism would undercut the corporate interests they so loyally serve. It's no wonder that "populism" has become a bad word in the argot of Democratic apparatchiks.

Most Americans have forgotten what it's like to have (sincerely) civic-minded public officials. Barring an inadequate bid by Bernie Sanders in 2016 and 2020, there has been a yawning, agonizing vacuum of principled leadership in the Democratic party. So…as with 2016, in the wake of the 2024 results, the Democratic party's top brass will bend over backwards to ensure that they learn absolutely nothing from their missteps. It comes as little surprise, then, that since the election, we have heard questions like: "The socio-economic elite adored her. What, then, could the explanation for Kamala's loss possibly be?!?"

Harris actually sent out a letter boasting about the slew of endorsements she'd received from corporate CEOs—a gesture that was almost as boneheaded as touring with Liz Cheney in the Rust Belt. We also heard comments like, "Kamala had all those celebrity endorsements, so how could she have lost?" Lost, indeed. Lost on the high-priced political consultants is the fact that those highfalutin endorsements not only didn't help; they reminded a restive electorate how astonishingly out-of-touch mainline Democrats were (and still are). While many of us love Beyoncé, it would be foolish to suppose she GETS the average bloke working 9 to 5 in small-town America. For many, celebrity endorsements often served more as a handicap than an asset.

One might say that while the Democratic establishment is utterly tone-def, Trump plays his audience like a fiddle. Either way, the rank and file gets the shaft. Big money is the problem with the Democratic party, not the solution. Unless Democrats first have a major reckoning, they cannot have a revival.

What else proved fatal? Against all sense, Kamala hitched her cart to Joe Biden's pallid horse. Barring a brief nod to the working class via the selection of Tim Walz for the bottom of the ticket, her foundering campaign eschewed full-bore Progressivism. She thereby retained the repellant stigma of the establishmentarian candidate. Clarion calls for pruning the obscenely-bloated military-industrial complex? Crickets. Clarion calls for universal public healthcare? Crickets. Reigning in Wall Street? Crickets. Suggestions to stimulate the economy by robust investment in public infrastructure? Mealy-mouthed lip-service. In light of this, every corporatist associated with the Democratic party was elated. (Here's looking at you, Jamie Dimon.)

Alas.  In spite of the mountain of evidence pointing to why MAGA once again prevailed, we are now treated to a panoply of birdbrained analyses like: “Kamala had the backing of the Swifties and the BeyHive, and even campaigned with Liz Cheney!  So the explanation for her loss must be that most Americans don’t want a woman of color in the Oval Office!”  (Point of contrast: Mexico is both more Christian and more riven with misogyny than the U.S., yet…overwhelmingly voted in a Jewish woman for president. Wherefore? She had a powerful—and sincere—Progressive message.)  Phyllis Schlafly, trailblazer of Christian Nationalism, was a woman.  Susie Wiles, the mind behind the MAGA movement, is a woman.  Half the talking-heads on FoxNews?  Women.  This is simply to say that there are despicable people of all demographics.

The moral of the story: Judging people by their genitalia and/or skin-tone is—at best—an exercise in fatuity.  Yet the DLC refuses to recognize any of this.  Taking a broader view: Since 2016, Democrats have failed to see that they are dealing with an intellectually-benighted, dispossessed electorate that was fed up with the same ol’ song and dance.

Low-information voters don’t want to feel preached to, they want to feel HEARD. The Democratic leadership wasn’t listening.

In between her melodramatic paeans to “democracy”, Kamala failed to persuade cynical voters that she was willing to take a bold stand against “the Establishment” that they so despised.  The Establishment?  To most people, everything that was wrong with the country could be pinned on this vague, menacing abstraction.  And—for reasons that should be clear to anyone with open eyes—since Obama left office, the Democratic Party has become SYNONYMOUS with this omni-present hobgoblin.

During the course of its three months of existence, the Harris campaign failed to see how important it was to explain the reasons behind the working class’ plight; which would have meant providing a cogent explanation for why a transition to a Green New Deal wouldn’t endanger employment opportunities, but BROADEN them.  Many of those in dire economic straits did not—and still don’t—understand that investment in basic public infrastructure stimulates the economy and CREATES jobs—to wit: that it redounds to appreciable benefits for the working class.  Had the full version of “Build Back Better” been allowed to pass in 2021 (and the Green New Deal been allowed to materialize), the American economy would have soared. Instead, we got a severely emaciated “Inflation Reduction Act”—a pathetic half-measure, the limited benefits of which were set to be delayed for many years.

All the while, the rank stench of the status quo lingered. It was Kamala's unwillingness to distance herself from the despised Democratic machine (read: Biden, Pelosi, Schumer, et. al.) that accounted for her inability to cultivate support in America's heartland. Instead of "turning the page", as she often put it, she opted to tout continuity with an administration that represented the very "Establishment" for which most of the working class—of all demographic profiles—had nothing but scorn. (!) From all this, Kamala's grossly over-paid advisers (most of whom had no idea what they were talking about) concluded: "We need more Cheney fans!" (Those same consultation firms all serve corporate power.) So the Harris campaign proceeded to parade around with a woman who's father was the high priest of Neocon ideology…and who voted with Trump 95% of the time. Kamala did this even as her campaign managers told Palestinian rights activists to fuck off.

It should now be crystal clear to anyone paying attention: Such operatives are paid obscene amounts of money to doll out horrible advice. After all, for the consultant class, the idea is never to recommend the moral course; it is always to recommend that which is most beneficial to those in power. What matters is not the common good; it's only the good of those who MATTER that truly matters.

Since Trump's first administration, many Neocons have come to call the Democratic Party home. As for upsetting the Pentagon's gold-plated applecart? Well, that's completely out of the question. (Kamala Harris' position could be distilled as follows: "I'm kinda sorta against war. By the way, let me introduce you to my new pal, Liz Cheney.") Making the case for human rights while tacitly supporting genocide sends rather mixed messages.

Also notable was Kamala's failure to explain what had caused inflation…AFTER the pandemic-induced supply-chain disruptions had been rectified. (Answer: rampant corporate malfeasance coupled with a lack of basic restraints on the financial services industry.) As might be expected, inflation was the source of many people's ire. Taken with a slew of outrageous misapprehensions, they were certain to channel that ire in the wrong direction (not toward corporate power, but instead toward policies that would have alleviated the inflation). Kamala's delinquent messaging caused her to hemorrhage supporters amongst crucial parts of the electorate…who, it cannot be emphasized enough, were irate about price increases; and were frantically looking for explanations.

Few people were aware: It was private equity firms that drove up real estate prices, thereby eradicating affordable housing. Meanwhile, giant corporations—with quasi-monopolistic control—engaged in price-gouging with impunity, affecting everything from poultry and eggs to car insurance and gas. It was unfettered corporate power—and insufficient investment in vital social services—that led to all the jarring inflation. And so it went: The Harris campaign's abject failure to dispel the absurd contention that inflation was somehow due to TOO MUCH public investment probably cost her the election. Such a ruinous misimpression entailed that the blame for economic hardship would be entirely misplaced. **{F}**

To be clear: Said misimpression led to the (erroneous) supposition that perhaps EVEN MORE right-wing economic policy (read: austerity measures, accession to corporate interests, and massive tax-cuts for the super-rich) might be the magical solution to their financial straits. In the meantime, low-information voters were inclined to blame stratospheric real estate prices not on plutocrats, but on impoverished immigrants. ("High rent? It's because of those darned Mexicans!") Little did many in the working class realize: Socio-economically, they have more in common with said immigrants than they do with Donald Trump and his cronies.

All this misdirected angst virtually guaranteed that people would not understand why society has the problems it has. They failed to grasp that it was because economic policy wasn't Progressive ENOUGH that inflation occurred. The answer to their woes was MORE investment in vital social services, and FEWER tax-breaks for financial behemoths. **{F}** Yet, in the throes of their seething resentments, biddable voters were more willing to believe that Haitian migrants were eating their pets than that Trump's policies only benefited America's most affluent…while screwing over everyone else.

The working class abandoned the Democratic party because the Democratic party abandoned them. Saddled with images of Biden's senility, Kamala soon became the new face of an out-of-touch "Establishment". ("Crime is low in wealthy neighborhoods; and the stock market is doing fabulous! So why's everyone complaining?") To this day, corporatist Democrats are more smitten with Neoliberalism—replete with its full array of depredations—than they are sympathetic to the plight of the working class.

So what happened? The Harris campaign burned through TWO BILLION DOLLARS in just three months. On what? On disastrous messaging (thanks to the aforementioned brigade of corporate consultants). As a result, Kamala was seen as

merely the latest proxy for “the Establishment”, interminably aloof and always foreboding. (Speaking to her audiences like she was speaking to a room-full of kindergarten children—replete with stilted affectation and vocal fry—only affirmed this image.) While there is certainly no love lost between most Americans and country-club Republicans, there is a comparable sentiment regarding “limousine liberals”…for whom the DLC is ground zero. In the (admittedly provincial) minds of Trump enthusiasts, support for MAGA was a searing repudiation of the same ol’ tired bullshit.

More to the point, the groundswell for MAGA was a stern rebuke of corporatist hacks who didn’t even pretend to understand the concerns of the average working-class voter. (Although Trump lies through his teeth with every breath, at least he PRETENDS to care about the regular, working-class bloke.) When people wracked with frustration do not have a productive way to vent, they will often channel their ire in extremely dysfunctional ways. In 2024, endorsing a blow-hard who pretends to give a shit about them, and who also despises politics-as-usual, seemed to be a good idea. (It’s good to have a bull in a China shop when everyone despises the China shop.)

At the end of the day, people need an outlet for their angst; and will opt for whichever outlet best presents itself. It’s worth reiterating: We humans tend to be suckers for a good story, so will gravitate to whoever is proffering the most compelling narrative. Many Americans understandably felt betrayed by the Democratic party; as—since FDR—it had always upheld a somewhat plausible facade of populism. By contrast, with regards to MAGA, there was no sense of betrayal. After all, until recently, the G.O.P. never really even pretended to be the party of the working class. Now it is seen as the fresh new alternative to a party that—for the past half century—has done nothing but dash the hopes of everyone who put their faith in it. Trump and Elon are gonna shake things up? Please, by all means! (But Trump’s full of shit, you say? Sure. But the Democrats looked no more sincere.)

Many swing-voters couldn’t be blamed for thinking: If Democratic party leaders were willing to be dishonest about something as blatantly obvious as Biden’s drastic cognitive deterioration, then what else were they willing to be dishonest about? “His glaring dementia? His severely slurred speech? Don’t worry; he’s sharp as a tack! The embodiment of lucidity and vitality!” Predictably, NOBODY bought this obvious fib. **{G}**

With regard to the issue of political correctness and identity politics, a few thoughts are in order. Though Kamala opted not to go out of her way to engage in such "woke" shenanigans; she did little to dissociate herself from them. Simply refraining from prioritizing her identity on the hustings was inadequate for disabusing most Americans of the impression that the Democrats were still wed to said ideology. She did not place identity politics front and center—a prudent choice. However, like it or not, short of explicitly disavowing all the "woke" nonsense (as most people saw it; and still see it), Kamala would continue to be tied to it. For it had (regrettably) become part of the Democrats' brand.

That proved to be fatal. For it was extremely difficult for the average Joe to relate to those who lectured him about implicit racial biases, cultural appropriation, and all the rest. The majority of America's rank and file effectively said to itself: "If you think it's fine to give puberty blockers to children who are confused about gender, then how in heaven's name are we supposed to trust you on anything else? And if you think that all White men are inherently racist and misogynist, then how am I to believe that you sincerely care about my well-being?"

To this day, such an out-of-touch perspective can still be found in elitist circles.

Republican or Democrat, we are still sold the idea that proper etiquette are—somehow—a surrogate for moral principles. While there is a mixture of Democrats and Republicans amongst America's socio-economic elites, most of them share the same country-club memberships. Looking down their noses at the proletariat is, for them, par for the course. Why? Because the myth of meritocracy persists: If people are affluent, it must be because they've done something admirable to deserve it; and if people are poor, they have nobody to blame but themselves.

"But Kamala rarely mentioned her gender or her skin-color." Granted. But too little too late.

While she did not emphasize identity politics, Kamala stopped short of rejecting it outright; so failed to distance herself from its debilitating stigma. Touting a so-called "opportunity economy" did little to ingratiate the electorate; for, at the end of the day, that was little more than a slogan. People are not moved by abstractions; they often need specifics. Anything less than explicitly repudiating the harangue of "White privilege" was going to be insufficient for shedding the tainted brand.

After Kamala was effectively coronated at the Democratic National Convention (as heir-apparent to Biden), there was very little that seemed organic about her. Even as she paid lip service to a few quasi-populist initiatives (e.g. the child tax credit; paid family leave; new anti-trust measures; tempered support for organized labor; a robust CFPB, and a rejuvenated NLRB), she ultimately remained a standard corporatist Democrat—eschewing full-bore economic populism in favor of Neoliberal (and Neocon) framing.

Her handlers failed to realize that politics is about perception, which makes mass-appeal a matter of image-engineering. Couple this careless oversight with a slew of glaring inconsistencies (the hypocrisy of denouncing the fascistic elements of MAGA while supporting Judeo-fascism in Palestine; crooning about democracy while sidelining primary challengers), and the party platform degenerated into a risible farce.

In response to Trump's (astoundingly effective) "blame all your problems on the Left" schtick, the DNC insists on running figures that are the opposite of what the Average Joe is looking for: someone who is relatable and down-to-earth, and is unscripted. Instead, they opt for oleaginous establishmentarians who offer only canned statements and empty rhetoric; and simply do whatever their corporate consultants tell them to do.

It can't be repeated enough: The difference between run-of-the-mill Democratic and run-of-the-mill Republican corporatists is largely one of branding. The former engage in ersatz Progressivism; the latter tend to be a bit more brazen about their sympathies for ethno-nationalism. Reactionaries of ALL stripes are often fine with colossal social injustices…so long as they're attending the right galas, commiserating with the right people, and using the appropriate fork at dinner.

When it comes to speaking to the masses, the well-groomed popinjays of the commentariat—from CNN to OAN—see fit to hold forth from the safe remove of their in gated communities. It turns out, though, that it's rather difficult to see the consequences of their avarice from behind the castle walls. So it is no revelation when we find that, on the cocktail circuit, Washington's movers and shakers don't hear much about the tribulations of America's abiding socio-economic injustice (let alone about the dire consequences of extreme wealth inequality). For they are only made privy to policies tailored to the corporate interests they serve—interests, that is, which ensure THEIR OWN continued position at the highest tiers of the socio-economic hierarchy.

Again: This goes for corporatists in both parties. Sure, the country-club Republicans AND “limousine liberals” pretend to lament the plight of the everyman. But they ALL do so even as they are drenched in sanctimony. The former reminisce about the good ol’ days, when everybody knew their god-given place; the latter telegraph their “woke” bona fides in between ships of chianti. Both decry the arrogance of “radicals”.

It rarely dawns upon most swing-voters that the U.S. already has a right-wing party: the Democratic party. The only viable alternative is a proto-fascist cult that used to be the G.O.P. Any attempt to go elsewhere is considered a “wasted vote”—a stubborn refusal to come to terms with the inevitable. Such is the nature of the current party duopoly.

It beggars the imagination that the world’s most famous representative democracy does not have a viable Progressive party. This presents somewhat of a predicament for many of those who are NOT prone to fascism. If the wayward voter is fed up with the Democrats, then he feels obliged to go elsewhere. Where might that be? Well, the only other place available. (Welcome to MAGA! Please pull up a seat, kick back and have a beer.) Sure enough, that’s how things played out in BOTH 2016 and 2024.

# CONCLUSION:

In 2024, Progressives were once again reminded that they must never underestimate the degree to which much of the American electorate is abysmally ill-informed; and—as a consequence—apt to (unwittingly) vote against their own best interests. From the Atlantic to the Pacific, political Stockholm Syndrome is now rampant…just as it is in so many other countries (which have themselves fallen victim to the trappings of faux populism).

In a nutshell, the modus operandi of those who join faux populist movements is: “We’re fed up with those serving the ‘elites’; and who care nothing about the common man; so we will vote for someone who serves corporate interests more than anyone else…and couldn’t care less about the general welfare.” Of course, this is not how THEY think of it. They simply want someone who promises to SHAKE THINGS UP; who is brazen and strident and willing to join them in saying “FUCK YOU” to the despised “Establishment”.

The solution to this is not hemming and hawing; it is generating awareness. For it is crucial to recognize the degree to which many Americans were so utterly confused when it came to policy. Note, for example, those who toggled between Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump over the course of the past decade. It should not be entirely shocking, then, that—in 2024—many checked the box for pro-choice initiatives and for Trump on the same ballot. Take away the plutocrats, bigots, and Christian Dominionists, and we find that many of those who joined MAGA in 2024 had been partial to Bernie Sanders in the previous two presidential elections. (!)

That a person who is NOT suffering from multiple personality disorder could go from supporting Sanders for almost a decade to supporting Trump attests to the staggering degree of confusion involved. (One imagines flipping a coin between the ACLU and the Klan.) Clearly, such a bizarre shift could not possibly have been due to a firm grasp of policy implications; as the policies of the two figures were diametrically opposed. We can only conclude that other factors determine voter choices. Frustration. Resentment. Nescience. Desperation.

Even more heartbreaking than all the cognitive dissonance: Countless voters of color were adamantly against the Democrats' support for the genocide in Palestine, so opted instead for Trump…who, it turns out, supports the Israeli government EVEN MORE. (Consequently, there were many disillusioned voters who voted for, say, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez down-ballot, yet Trump at the top!) Yes, most people want law and order. YET, they will then pull the lever for a known fraudster with 6 bankruptcies and 34 felony convictions. (It's like encountering a habitual arsonist and pretending he's the fire marshal.) While this represents a kind of political schizophrenia that boggles the mind, it reveals how many swing voters actually operate. People are dazed and confused; disoriented and irate.

It bears worth repeating: The impulses of such voters are not governed by a meticulous critical analysis of all available evidence. Instead, they base their decisions on vibes. Rather than participants in deliberative democracy, many Americans are like impulse buyers—easily snookered into making rash decisions. (For more on this point, see Thomas Frank's **What's The Matter With Kansas**.) America's Political Stockholm Syndrome serves as a reminder that cultic thinking is like Novocaine for cognitive dissonance.

Frustration short-circuits our rational facilities; and hampers our ability to engage in critical deliberation. Bogus as it is, Trump's anti-establishment schtick was astoundingly effective amongst those who were fed up with the usual rigamarole

(read: the annoyingly “woke” Neoliberalism of the Democratic party). For many, a vote for Trump was a giant middle finger to what they see as “the Establishment”: a cabal of feckless political operatives who are—day in and day out—so obviously completely full of shit.

When ill-informed Americans hear Donald Trump, they feel as though he speaks for them. When those same people hear Democratic establishmentarians (most infamously, Hillary Clinton), they are confident of one thing: “He/she does not speak for me.” In the absence of REAL populism, the country’s rank and file will opt for a cheap knock-off if it is hawked to them with enough pizzaz. Ergo Trump.

My contention is this: Faux populism can only be defeated by genuine populism. Since Bill Clinton, though, the Democratic party has offered only anti-populism. The Harris campaign had all the money in the world, yet had no bold positions. As if to make matters worse, it turns out that all its celebrity endorsements were paid for. The grand vizier of narcissism herself, Oprah Winfrey, insisted that the campaign PAY HER a million dollars to make a couple appearances. This one fact is quite revealing. (The Black woman who welcomes me at the local Walmart—likely for minimum wage—gave more money to the Harris campaign than this self-absorbed billionaire.)

Again, there was no answer when it came to standing up to corporate interests; or to ensuring affordable healthcare; or to curbing the price of gas, groceries, medical care, and housing. While serving America’s most affluent (and hewing to corporate interests at every turn), it SHOULD be apparent that Trump and his cronies do not care about the well-being of the everyman; but it is NOT apparent to millions of low-information voters. Why not? Well, because Trump and co. ACT like they care. So many Americans **feel seen** by them. When people are frustrated, they are looking for clear-cut answers…even if those answers are largely baloney.

So the question is not why so many Americans are unable to see through the sham that is MAGA; the question, rather, is why the Democratic party is unable to see THEM.

It is not the working class’ job to support the Democratic candidate; it’s the Democratic candidate’s job to support the working class. Instead, corporatists located at key positions within the Democratic party do little more than serve the powerful lobbies that write them hefty checks. As they dance to the beat of their big-money donors, they pay lip service to lofty ideals like “freedom” and “family

values”.  They then turn around and castigate anyone who has the gall to request that they serve the common-man rather than the power elite.  The Democrats’ message to the electorate is effectively: “We engage in tons of corruption, but just not quite as much as the other party.  Therefore you should go with us.”

This is not a good sales pitch.

We mustn’t let a cadre of loud, cantankerous pseudo-activists ruin things for the rest of us.  The Regressive “Left” makes the REAL Left look ridiculous; and provides right-wing polemicists with bountiful ammunition to paint genuine Progressives as nutty ideologues.  (The Democrats’ rampant corporatism didn’t help.)  To most of those in Middle America, the Democratic party simply reeks of the status quo.

On all the corporate networks, those of us who care very deeply for the Progressive cause are painted with the same brush as those who offer only specious claims, frivolous indictments, and harebrained ideas.  For those who are bamboozled by right-wing propaganda, the thinking is effectively: Why go with Republican lite when you can get the real thing?

Trump disguised himself as **a man of the people**.  For low-information voters, this worked like a charm.  The reality is, of course, strikingly different from such (mis)impressions.  All Trump ACTUALLY does is eliminate funds to vital social services and to important infrastructure projects…while dolling out a slew of enormous corporate tax-breaks.  He happily pushes draconian austerity measures of the sort that have wreaked havoc in countries around the world (whenever those countries have become overtaken by right-wing economic policy).  It makes sense, then, that right-wing libertarians have been appointed to bogus positions of “government efficiency”.

Entirely lost on his fawning audiences was the fact that—during his first term—almost none of the much-touted tax cuts went to the working class (the cuts predominantly benefited the ultra-wealthy); childhood poverty skyrocketed; over 200,000 jobs were outsourced; millions of people lost healthcare; and—to add insult to injury—the G.O.P. blocked overtime pay for about 8 million workers. (Stiffing workers is, after all, Trump’s stock in trade.) Alas, these devastating facts were irrelevant; because Trump managed to brand himself as the outsider who was audacious enough to take a stand against “the Establishment”.  Meanwhile, virtually every Democratic figure had become a MASCOT FOR said “Establishment”.

The thesis here is worth re-stating: Given America's party duopoly, the only alternative to turbo-charged Reaganomics was a more collegial version of corporatism. It didn't always used to be this way. Until the turn of the millennium, the Democrats' Neoliberalism left room for some paeans to civil rights…even as it has been doing the bidding of its corporate paymasters. But by the opening years of the 21st century, Democrats offered artificially-flavored hogwash as the only alternative to the Republicans' bald-faced corruption. And for the past generation, the preponderance of ersatz Progressivism on the so-called "Left" have only made the Democratic brand look worse.

Considering its refusal to be genuinely populist, it's no wonder that—ever since the waning years of the Obama administration—the Democratic party has lost support from almost every demographic. **{H}**

Recall an ironclad law of politics: When not challenged by genuine populism, faux populism (a.k.a. fascism) wins every time. This has been demonstrated over and over and over again, in country after country after country—in virtually every instance that a demagogue has risen to power. Fascists succeed when their message finds purchase in the minds of an exasperated population that feels that it's been left with no other good options. Therein lies the rub: This occurs whenever the alternative party fails to deliver.

When people are fed up with the status quo, they go elsewhere…anywhere…looking for solutions. In both 2016 and 2024, we saw that faux populism was oddly effective insofar as there is a vacuum left by an absence of genuine populism. The DLC would much prefer to see the G.O.P. prevail than give Progressives any birth (ref. Obama's panicked call to James Clyburn in the spring of 2020). As it turns out, corporatists associated with the Democratic party would prefer to see proto-fascists win than stand up to Wall Street, Big Pharma, AHIP, private military contractors, and AIPAC. Election cycle after election cycle, they have dependably chosen to cozy up to Blackrock, Goldman Sachs, and Raytheon…instead of fighting for social democracy.

And—most reprehensibly of all—the Democratic leadership would rather lose an election than defy their beloved AIPAC. (Wondering if racism / fascism has also infected the Democratic party? There's your answer.) As it turns out, for mainline Democrats, ethno-nationalism is fine overseas…as long as we quash it here in the U.S. So even as they stridently denounce racial prejudice in corporate boardrooms, Democratic party operatives are content to look the other way when geo-political

allies perpetrate atrocities in faraway lands (see Israel; Saudi Arabia). Many Democrats fail to recognize that it is extremely difficult to take a credible stand against ethno-nationalism at home when one is supporting it abroad.

Kamala Harris was completely on board when the Biden administration insisted that yet more public funds be diverted to support not one, but TWO genocides: one perpetrated by the Saudi regime in Yemen (fascism based on Wahhabism), one perpetrated by the Israeli regime in Palestine (fascism based on Revisionist Zionism). Salafi fascism or Judeo-fascism: pick your poison. Along with the G.O.P., the Democratic party picked both.

The Washington Beltway has always been a Bacchanal of influence-peddling and horse-trading. With Trump back at the helm, it is now open season for favors-swapping of the most insidious kind. Trump has already been bought off so as to ensure his AUGMENTED support for a pair of heinous regimes: two billion dollars to Jared Kushner from the House of Saud; and hundreds of millions of dollars to Trump from the Adelsons. (This is not to mention the Kochs and Mercers; as well as Tim Mellon, Paul Singer, and all the other usual suspects.) Considering all this, it is an earth-shattering irony that many of those who were persuaded to back Trump did so because they were fed up with all of the DEMOCRATS' corruption.

Nobody in the history of American politics has ever been so eager as Donald Trump to sell policy to the highest bidder. This is his own "art of the deal". As crazy as it sounds to those of us who know better, the fact that Trump is more engorged with corruption than virtually anyone else in American history does not matter to many of America's woefully un-informed voters…who only see him as the guy brave enough to buck "the Establishment." (To repeat: The only alternative seems to be corporatist Democrats who seem to always be engaged in cloying theatrics.)

In terms of presentation, the contrast between Trump and Harris couldn't have been more stark. Like any demagogue, Trump continued to be the consummate crowd-pleaser…playing to his audience like a savvy performer on a Vegas stage. For those who pay no attention to policy, this seemed to be a breath of fresh air. Meanwhile… during her tub-thumping, whenever Kamala managed to NOT sound overly-scripted, she devolved into a kind of sanctimonious blather. At almost every turn, she only succeeded in reminding swing voters (i.e. the people who decide elections) that she was beholden to her donors; not to the everyman. Amidst all the mawkish fanfare and overwrought choreography, she failed to sound like anyone other than an emissary of Washington's political machine—recycling pre-packaged talking-points

and spouting market-tested bromides in between nervous laughs. (That her riffing on the stump often turned into word-salad didn't help either.) Rather than take bold stands (e.g. speaking out against the effort to privatize everything under the sun), she opted instead for sloganeering…which elicited more eye-rolls than inspiration.

I ask the reader to consider the following message to America's White working class:

While you are struggling to pay extortionate medical bills and scrambling to meet next month's increasingly-high rent (with the meager wages you receive from a stressful job), we insist that inflation isn't all that bad; and that crime isn't still a problem. And we will scold you for "implicit racial bias"…while begrudging you for not being a person of color. You're overworked and underpaid, yet shall be chastised for some sort of "privilege" you have never noticed you had…which, so far as you can see, has yielded diddly squat since the day you were born.

One may as well presage such an ornery pronouncement with, "I do declare…" in a cut-glass British accent. (All the better if said when sipping cognac whilst lounging on ornately-upholstered divans. Eye monocle is optional.) Or consider this:

Inflation is a bit of a problem, but White-splaining / man-splaining is even worse! And sure, legalized graft may be undermining the democratic process, but make sure you specify your pronouns in your bio.

This is the message that much of the rank and file hears from the Regressive "Left"; and it explains why tens of millions of Progressively-inclined Americans THRICE cast a ballot for Trump. Begrudging people for their ethnicity is never a good idea. Shunning them for imagined transgressions instead of hearing about their very real problems is a surefire way to not get their vote.

Instead of being recognized as a movement that's looking out for the common-man, Progressivism is stigmatized as a brigade of ornery school-marms—sanctimonious and persnickety—who tacitly endorse genocide in Palestine while insisting that children should have access to on-demand puberty-blockers. This is a recipe for abject electoral failure. While some of Kamala's lack of support amongst the far-right can be attributed to gender and/or racial biases, such prejudice does nothing to explain, well, EVERYONE ELSE who opted not to support her on election day. **{H}**

Looking back: A successful campaign against the MAGA movement would have conveyed the following sentiment: "I understand why some of you might be tempted to join the MAGA bandwagon. You're frustrated; and you want to tear down the

system, which REALLY IS rigged against you. Trump seems to be the only one who is brazen enough to do it." Translation: I hear you. And I understand your concerns." **{I}**

Want to get the working class vote? Don't scold them; understand them. Only then can one help THEM understand which policies will best serve the common good. Put another way: Don't tell people what they are supposed to believe; instead, give them the unvarnished facts (providing evidence, as needed), then articulate the basic principles on which the proposed position is based.

Don't make it about joining the right team; make it about alleviating their travails. This can be done without compromising Progressive principles. It would be a misreading of this essay to suppose it is—in any way—calling for a movement rightward; or for making "strategic" concessions to the right wing. Getting through to people and capitulating to them are two entirely different things. (Extending an olive branch to voters is not bending the knee to politicians.) The proposed course is a matter of edification, not of "compromise". Reaching out to those who are sympathetic to MAGA is in no way conceding that the opprobrious movement ITSELF has credence; it is merely recognizing that some of the concerns that some Trump voters have actually makes sense.

It is possible that such a revolutionary endeavor might spur major transformation within the Democratic party. Perhaps it will even give birth to a new political party. This depends on how entrenched corporate interests are in the party's infrastructure. I like to believe that the Democratic party is not irredeemably corrupt. After the old guard passes away, we'll find out.

# FINAL THOUGHTS:

MAGA cannot be defeated by a campaign; it can only be defeated by a sustained movement—a movement that actually addresses all the things the Trump PRETENDS to address. The Democratic party—in its current incarnation—is ill-equipped to mobilize such a movement. How so? Because only genuine populism can defeat faux populism. This is why—had he been permitted to be the Democratic nominee—Bernie Sanders would have clobbered Trump in 2016, as well as in the two subsequent elections. (Note: Had they been run on the level, Sanders would have prevailed in BOTH Democratic primaries in which he ran.) So what is to be done about Trump's proto-fascist (cult) movement? An actual Progressive would offer a

compelling and meaningful counter-vision. This would entail offering a stark alternative ON POLICY; which would itself entail bucking the demands of virtually all big-money donors. Identity politics would not play a role in this vision. Nor would corporate lobbies.

The panoply of distractions decried here includes gripes about “cultural appropriation”, which sows needless discord. While it is important to tout lofty ideals, specific policy proposals are where the rubber meets the road. So it is on policy that we must focus. A worthwhile Progressive movement requires both integrity and tenacity—two things notably lacking in the current Democratic party. (While the G.O.P. has none of the former, it’s got the latter in spades.)

As the American Republic verges on self-immolation, we must stay firm in our commitment to civil society. Deliberative democracy takes work; and quickly disintegrates when neglected.

Never mind that Kamala refused to take a stand against the ethnic cleansing in Palestine (undertaken with her own administration’s support)…while actively marginalizing Muslim Americans (or anyone speaking up for Palestinian rights, for that matter) during the course of her campaign. Never mind that she remained a lapdog for the military-industrial complex (including a rube for the boondoggle in Ukraine, which proved to be a bonanza for private military contractors…with almost nothing else to show for the massive infusion of tax-payer money). Never mind that she failed to explain the reasons for inflation. And never mind she stubbornly refused to fight for universal public healthcare. According to identitarians on the Regressive “Left”, Kamala’s failure to win over hearts and minds in the Rust Belt was largely due to the fact that she has brown skin and a vagina. They are wrong. Ask Ruwa Romman of Georgia.

Working-class Americans want good policy. The “catch” is that they need its merits explained in a cogent way—preferably via a simple, compelling narrative—by someone who really means it (see Ilhan Omar). Given the right policies and savvy messaging, a green-skinned hermaphrodite would prevail in every election…even in a country where racism and misogyny are still a problem.

Few genuine Progressives have the courage to tell the denizens of the Regressive “Left” (or the Democratic party’s astonishingly feckless leadership) that THEY are part of the problem. Put bluntly: Corporatism in both major political parties helped to get Trump elected. Twice. So did ersatz Progressivism, which has sabotaged the

Democratic party for decades. In recognizing this, it is worth recalling a statement made by Abraham Lincoln in his Lyceum speech of 1838: “If destruction be our lot, we ourselves will be the authors.”

# Footnotes

**A:** The same stunt was pulled with “socialism”, which both Neoliberals in the West AND Stalinists in Russia—as well as Maoists in China—were more than happy to associate with Soviet-style “communism”. This was done whether the aim was to frighten people away from GENUINE “socialism” (in the first case) or to garner support for what was, in actuality, a fascist regime (in the case of Russia and China) by employing populist rhetoric. If we look at North Korea, which (preposterously) characterizes itself as “communist”, we see a textbook case of fascism (to wit: totalitarianism based on theocratic ethno-nationalism); not a liberal democracy in keeping with Marxian ideals. It should go without saying that a system of high-concentrated wealth / power and top-down control over the population is the polar opposite of a vision based on distributed wealth / power and bottom-up control (whereby people maintain sovereignty over their own lives). Some of the best exposition on genuine populism—and the current lack thereof—has been done by Thomas Frank in his books **Listen, Liberal** and **The People, No**.

**B:** This is a frank diagnosis, not an aspersion. It is simply stating an incontrovertible fact: Solid moral principles married with a thorough understanding of policy would preclude someone from supporting such a horrific political figure. To make such a bad choice, there needs to be either a case of severe moral depravity, or—if not—colossal ignorance of the implications of Trump’s policy positions. (Most Americans don’t even understand that the economy is stimulated from the demand side.) This essay attempts to show how those with the latter problem might be understood; as most of those who pulled the lever for Trump arguably meant well, yet were extremely misguided. Such people are, in theory, open to persuasion. As for those who are morally depraved (that is: motivated by greed and/or bigotry), the problem goes far beyond the purview of sociology and political theory. More often than not, trying to get through to such people is a fool’s errand. Those driven by avarice don’t care who is harmed, so long as obstacles are removed to further concentrate wealth / power in their hands. And those who are driven by racism / sexism are not going to be swayed by sound argumentation. In any case, so far as the politicians they support are concerned, such people are useful idiots. Corrupt politicians simply ingratiate themselves with this target audience to get elected; but

once in office, their primary mission is to serve the power elite. (Starting in 1970's, Republican politicians made a Faustian bargain with Christian nationalists that was roughly as follows: "I have something you want: political power. You have something I want: voters who can help give me that power." For more on this, see Chris Hedges' American Fascists.) My recommendation: It is only those who are NOT morally depraved with which Progressives should be concerned; as, given the right messaging, they are reach-able. How? By offering a compelling narrative—namely one that helps voters see which policies will ACTUALLY benefit them. While it is tempting to dismiss all MAGA voters as a mob of blundering idiots, doing so would be a mistake. Granted, idiocy may explain some of their political choices (they are, after all, dupes); but a lack of understanding does not necessarily correlate with a lack of intelligence. (In any case, plenty of registered Democrats are idiots as well.) That said: If a person is highly intelligent and has a solid moral compass, it is unfathomable that he/she would succumb to right-wing thinking. To understand how and why this sort of thing occurs, it is worth considering how many (otherwise) intelligent people have been hoodwinked in other contexts.

**C:** Soon after the election, analytics revealed that the less-informed voters were, the more likely they were to throw in their lot with MAGA. Level of education (along with frustration with economic issues) was the most salient factor for those in the working class who were persuaded to support Trump. This is a reminder that deliberative democracy cannot abide in the midst of extreme nescience. How serious is this problem in the U.S.? There are three countries in the world wherein the vast majority of the population is completely brainwashed: North Korea, China, and Israel. I submit that, though not nearly as extreme, the U.S. would be next on that list (though it has some stiff competition from the likes of Turkmenistan, Saudi Arabia, and Mauritania). The only way to remedy this is by persistent, effective messaging—messaging that conveys the merits of (genuinely) Progressive policies; and dependably shows who, exactly, promotes said policies.

**D:** Harris needed to do two things. ONE: Disassociate herself from the dreaded "Establishment" (which entailed distancing herself from the incumbent administration). TWO: Explain how Progressive economic policy would help the working class (which entailed explaining how Trump's agenda would not). Not only did Harris do NEITHER of these things; it was difficult for her to do either with sincerity. For she was part of the said "Establishment"; and she routinely flouted Progressive policy—both economic and foreign. That was her downfall.

**E:** Edward Snowdon put it aptly: “When exposing a crime is treated as committing a crime, you are being ruled by criminals.” Those who characterize the indictment of Revisionist Zionism (i.e. Judeo-fascism) as “anti-Semitic” only succeed in providing the world with proof of their own moral debasement. This is classic projection—every bit as risible as a rapist accusing his victim of an abomination for having the gall to resist his assault. Fascist regimes thrive insofar as people develop an allergy to—nay, hostility toward—veracity. So goes the adage: Truth sounds like hate to those who hate Truth.

**F:** In 2020, inflation occurred due to drastically-limited supply, which was caused by pandemic-induced global supply-chain disruptions. In the wake of this, corporations gamed the system to no end. Once the supply chains were mostly restored, the fix was already in. Subsequent inflation was not driven by an increase in purchasing power (not by an increase in demand); it was largely induced by corporate malfeasance (greed). Purchasing power actually DE-creased. Per the conventional supply-demand dynamic, prices increase when people have the ability to pay higher prices (that is: because they have more money in their pockets)…even as the supply of goods does not increase to meet the augmented demand. The theory here is simple: If you put more money into circulation while holding supply constant, then prices will increase. Businesses charge as much as they can get away with. So an increase in purchasing power is ONE reason prices would go up in the event that supply remains the same…or even decreases. But in THIS instance (2021, 2022, and 2023), prices increased even though most people were struggling to pay. In other words: There was an over-riding factor. That factor was unbridled corporate power. It turns out that the supply-demand curve does not take into account enormous power / information asymmetries, whereby pricing can go up due to things other than an augmented purchasing power of (most) consumers. Corporations found that they could exploit latent exigencies, and get away with bilking consumers; so that’s exactly what they did. (Proof that most corporations weren’t “forced” by dire circumstances to boost prices: virtually all of them posted record profits for these same years.) Even as many parties gamed the system (due to the sloppy implementation and poor oversight of the CoViD stimulus program), the contention that overall inflation could be attributed to TOO MUCH STIMULUS is not only false; it is exactly backwards. (Contrary to the myth of supply-side economics, still prevalent in right-wing circles, economies are stimulated from the demand side.) So what would have prevented inflation? Less catering to corporate interests and more investment in basic public infrastructure. Comprehension of this simple fact would have made support for Trump utterly inconceivable (for anyone

with a moral compass, that is). So what needs to be done? Step one is tying inflation to corporate greed. But step two is even more crucial: Recognizing the simple fact that–regarding economic policy—the further to the right we go, the more severe corporatism becomes; and the more consumers get bilked. Trying to mitigate inflation by supporting the G.O.P. is like trying to make ice by boiling water.

**G:** Stammering and mumbling, Biden stumbled through each teleprompter reading as his handlers pretended not to be embarrassed. (Early signs of dementia were evident as far back as 2020, during his initial presidential run; and only increased thereafter.) Biden's staff then rebuked anyone who pointed out the obvious: his slurred speech and glazed-over eyes were indications of precipitous cognitive decline. For most people, witnessing this was unbearable. As if playing "Weekend At Bernie's" with POTUS wasn't bad enough, the administration opted to give Hillary Clinton the Medal of Freedom even as it continued to endorse genocide…all as Uncle Joe struggled to remember where he was standing at any given moment.

**H:** In Michigan, had she gotten the entire Muslim vote, Kamala would have handily won the state. In Pennsylvania, had she gotten the Green Party vote tally, and 43,000 people who'd swung for Trump had remained steadfast in their support for the Democratic candidate, Kamala would have prevailed there. And in Wisconsin, just 15,000 people voting differently would have done it. (!) Never mind the tens of thousands of un-inspired voters in those three crucial swing-states who decided to just stay home. (Nationwide, 6.3 million fewer people pulled the lever for the Democratic candidate than in the previous election.) Even as Trump received about 3 million more votes than he did in the last cycle, the majority of those gains were not in swing-states. The increase was predominantly flocks of disenchanted, working-class voters in solid Blue and solid Red states. (In California alone, more than 1.8 million people who'd voted for Biden four years earlier either switched parties or stayed home.) There was also a smattering of Muslim voters who were so disgusted by the Democrats' support for the genocidal regime in Israel that they pulled the lever for Trump sheerly out of spite (or, rather, out of desperation). For them, a vote for Trump was like a Hail Mary, thrown in a fit of vexation. According to a survey done by YouGov, of the 19+ million voters who voted for Biden in 2020 yet opted to stay home in 2024, almost 6 million cited the administration's support for the genocide in Palestine as the top reason for not going to the polls the second time around. (This includes the present author.) In fact, that single issue may have

been the decisive factor in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Arizona. (!) It turns out that most sane people are against ethnic cleansing; and don't support the pointless slaughter of over a hundred thousand innocent civilians. Go figure.

**I:** Helpful tip to Democratic party leaders: Try listening to Briahna Joy Gray instead of Joy Reid. Want guidance from Progressive Black scholars? Rather than seeking counsel from (corporatist) consultation firms, heed the wisdom of Cornell West, Adolph Reed Jr., Waleed Shahid, and Butch Ware. And—most importantly—support Progressive firebrands like Barbara Lee, Ro Khanna, Nina Turner, Cori Bush, and Greg Casar rather than establishment apparatchiks like Chuck Schumer, James Clyburn, Kirsten Gillibrand, Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, Josh Gottheimer, and Nancy Pelosi. In the long run, the party must divorce itself from all big-money donors. Every last one. If, on the other hand, the party wants to ensure more losses in the future, it should appoint a corporate stooge like Rahm Emanuel as chair of the DNC.

## Postscript:

The financialization of a nation's economy is characterized by speculative excess; and abetted by the privatization of everything under the sun. An indication that the hyper-financialization of the U.S. economy is a problem is the fact that P-E ratios are inordinately high. (In other words: The ratio of market valuations to productivity are currently at ridiculous levels.) Delusive thinking, unchecked corporate interests, and artificially-generated hype all drive overblown market capitalization, which is enabled to bolster stock prices; and thus the wealth of the well-positioned few. A scourge of inflated market caps prompts hyper-leveraging (investment against dubious collateral). Rampant over-valuation leads to speculative bubbles. Such grave dysfunction is exacerbated by stock buy-backs and lack of regulation / oversight of corporate activity. This is unbridled capitalism at its most virulent.

Untaxed capital gains and extremely low taxes on dividends creates a disastrously skewed incentive structure; and it is within such an incentive structure that America's socio-economic elite operate. Corporate greed undermines civil rights, corrupts government officials, and—yes—induces inflation. Virtually everything wrong with the U.S. economy right now—from high housing prices to extortionate medical bills—can be attributed, in large part, to corporatism—replete with cronyism and legalized graft. When highly-concentrated wealth / power (read: top-down control) is married with militant ethno-nationalism (read: ethno-centric policies and cultic thinking), the result is something commonly known as "fascism"—replete with

authoritarian governance, the dissolution of civil rights, and a fetishization of martial glory. Proponents deign to marry Christian Dominionism, White Supremacy, and right-wing libertarianism. (Curtis Yarvin sees Orwell's 1984 as a nifty idea rather than as a warning. Our dystopia is his utopia.) Lo and behold: Fascism exists at the nexus of theocracy, ethno-nationalism, and corporatism.

I recoil at the prospect of watching our country be plunged into a political nightmare. It's not merely the fact that a sociopathic, mentally-handicapped narcissist will be occupying the Oval Office; it's that so many Americans have been snookered into thinking that he is anything other than a sociopathic, mentally-handicapped narcissist. This new administration is going to rob us blind, enabling kleptocrats to loot the treasury while gutting crucial departments—from the NLRB to the CFPB—as they funnel public funds into the coffers of chummy oligarchs.

How does this state of affairs come to pass? As Frank Herbert put it: "All governments suffer a recurring problem: Power attracts pathological personalities. It is not that power corrupts but that it is magnetic to the corruptible." Meanwhile, highly intelligent people—especially those who are principled—often don't do well in power structures…what with all the measured claims, nuanced thinking, and critical reflection. Their rectitude, empathy, temperance, and equanimity are handicaps; not assets. They see complexity where less intelligent people see—and only want—simplicity. They don't make grandiose promises, nor do they reduce everything to simplistic sound-bites. Yet it is by grandiose claims and simplistic sound-bites—especially those that are confidently pronounced—that many are persuaded.

The key, then, is GRAVITAS. Many of us are apt to heed those that exude an air of authority…even if they are completely full of shit. Indeed, simple-minded people want to hear snazzy platitudes and catch-phrases…especially by those who radiate confidence and charm. We are often mesmerized by a litany of buzz-terms that are loosely strung together in semi-coherent ways.

Hence many prefer bold assertions—even if delusive—over thoughtful deliberation. When a demagogue is courting biddable followers, boldness is often seen as a sign of sapience. (Spoil alert: Most followers are biddable.) In such cases, tenacity interpreted as credibility. Consequently, gormless crowds are often swayed by sheer force of personality. The demagogue's confidence is misconstrued as competence; and his success in gathering acolytes is taken as corroboration of this impression. (See Donald Trump.) And so power tends to be arrogated into smaller and smaller,

ever-more-exclusive precincts—forming a good ol' boys club of self-serving insiders, who operate on a pay-to-play basis. All relationships are transactional. Self-dealing is de rigueur.

We lose sight of the fact that the key to democracy is to prevent wealth/power from becoming too highly concentrated; to attenuate the worst excesses of the ruling class; and to mitigate the ability of the power elite to lord it over everyone else. In sum: It is to forestall plutocracy.

Contemplating the implications of the second Trump administration—a cadre of theocrats, plutocrats, and lunatics—is enough to induce nausea. (We would be living in a very different world had, last July, a certain bullet had been just a few more inches to the right. Of course, had Fred Trump not copulated with Mary Anne MacLeod in Queens back in September of 1945, we'd also be living in a different world. Alas.) The Oval Office is now occupied by a man with no moral scruples, with no interest but self-aggrandizement (and whatever he can siphon into his own pockets). We are standing witness to the most corrupt administration in U.S. history. The government is now run by a gang of fanatics, imbeciles, and criminals. God help us all.