

Resistance Dispatches: Foreign and Domestic



Every American soldier takes an oath to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies. Since I left the service, I wondered who those enemies truly were. Once, I thought they were those disciples of God in the mountains of Afghanistan. When we went to war, the newsreaders told us that the Taliban buried women up to their necks and crushed their skulls with stone. It was a war on American ideals, because it was a war on women. They locked them away like prisoners, forced them into marriage, scarred their faces with acid. Though I cannot say what this had to do with airplanes pitched into our monuments of commerce and battle, I went to war to fight in the name of women whom I never saw. The closest I ever came was when we killed the men and heard the mothers, sisters, and wives wailing behind the *qalat* walls. The saccharine thrill of

combat turned to lye in my mouth. Only after years of contemplation can I ask myself if I was just another man waging war on women, simply on another front.

When we elected the 45th President, I felt as if the war had followed me home. It seemed like everyone was looking for an enemy. For those who won the election, the enemy occupied the space of the foreign—the sexually aberrant, culturally diverse, economically anathematic to the so-called American Dream. My enemy, on the other hand, was domestic—that man elected President and the bigots he enabled with hate speech.

I welcomed a fight. It was a respite from my self-imposed exile from the people around me. Sharing the beauty, pain, and trials of my time in Afghanistan was like speaking an alien tongue. Gone was the collective purpose that I took for granted in the Army, but now the threat of that man in the high castle galvanized people into action. I also must admit that there was comfort in the tumult and panic—the pain of others seemed to lessen my own—helplessness and isolation were now part of the emotional vernacular. So when the call went out to march on the Capitol, I volunteered. Many of the protesters drew from a well of deep moral wounds, structural oppression, or strength to march. If I am honest, in that moment I approached the Women's March as a soldier, and this was simply another battle to fight.



Ksenia V. CPT, USAF (sep.)

I traveled with my friend Ksenia, a former Air Force Captain. We planned to march with Common Defense, an organization of progressive veterans opposed to the new president. On the drive south, she told me that many of the people with whom she

served opposed her politics. Many of them cut ties with her when she made public her intention to march. I watched the nude trees outside my window, passing too fast to distinguish branches. So many of my former comrades and fellow veterans also spoke against the protestors. I found people I love on the other side of this new conflict. Would I have to count them among my enemies as well?

Give war a chance, one of them wrote on Facebook.

OPEN YOUR small minds, you whining losers, wipe away your tears, and open your malicious hearts, AND JOIN IN GIVING GOVERNMENT BACK TO THE PEOPLE! wrote another.

At the time, I did not realize that I would have to carry their reputation with me—that others would see me as the same as these angry veterans. I buried my phone in my pocket for the rest of the ride. At rest stops, I watched the nursing mothers in pink hats and elder matriarchs with their signs in windows. These were the people my one-time comrades railed against? I cried in front of my soldiers, fought beside them, triumphed because of them. Would they see my decision to march as a betrayal?



Abuse of power comes as no surprise

I muffled my doubts. When we arrived, I reunited with old friends. We smoked and drank too much, dancing the way the young do because they do not yet understand they will die. To celebrate with people I loved felt novel, like learning how to whistle, and for the first time in years I thought I might name something happiness. Voices too loud from liquor, hands fluttering, and wide eyed, we looked forward to a march, organized by women of color, Muslims, and queer women. It appeared that the organizers had made good on their claims to place intersectionality at the fore.

In the morning, I pinned my medals to my jacket, took up my sign. *VETS VS HATE*, it read. Demonstrators inundated the subway platforms. Trains passed, one after another, bringing more people. The station choked with bodies, it was almost impossible to move. Cheers coursed through the crowd, amplified by the arched concrete enclosure and I worried if the huddled voices might rattle the station walls apart and

bury us alive. There were so many people underground, it was difficult to breathe. Above-ground carried the same sense of unease, the overflowing streets patrolled by national guardsman and police, yet as people gathered, even they were hemmed in and immobilized. I grew up in Alexandria just across the river, and I never saw the streets so full. The place I planned to meet Ksenia and the other veteran protesters was too crowded when I arrived. I looked for her, but I couldn't move more than a few feet, wriggling through the assemblage. I thought, if we all wanted to, we could take control of the city.

Demonstrators wore the near-ubiquitous cat-eared pink hats, held their signs—their political convictions aloft for the world to see. I too performed my identity, but as a veteran of the War in Afghanistan. Some of the demonstrators looked at me the way I once had looked at Afghans—*friend or foe?* There were many men there—fleece-clad fathers pushing strollers, boyfriends and husbands clinging to lovers or spouses, waving rainbow flags, but I was the only one who trespassed into the territory of threatening. Being a veteran may have evoked images of violent American Legionnaires at rallies during the election. *Man, soldier, medals*—symbols of masculinity, patriarchy.

Yes, I'm a veteran, I told them, yes I'm here in solidarity. I could not choose between removing my hat and my medals, or shouting at the top of my lungs *I'm one of you.* I told myself that it was important to show that those that served were not props for hate. I told myself that this day was never about me. Yet there was something else. Most of the faces around me were white. There was a group of Muslim students, a smattering of people of color, but each of us—all of us, were surrounded. I made calculations—was I using the right speech pattern? Was my posture sufficiently unthreatening? Did my expression say *I don't want any trouble?* I've been told that I'm too self-conscious, that I should *just relax*, but anyone who said that

never had to live a life of color. I remember one childhood summer in Philadelphia, fleeing from a white teenager brandishing a baseball bat. In Louisiana, I lived on a block where I let all my white neighbors know that I owned guns because they spoke as if blacks still belonged under the lash. They only spoke to my white wife, as if I wasn't there to hear them—that I served on active duty seemed to make no difference to them.

Yet I was still a man among hundreds of thousands of women. They came to the Capitol because of a misogynist and bigot. Where the sense of urgency brought my friends and me together, at the march, my anxieties might have played off those of the other protesters, creating distance. White or not, that we all feared for our bodies should have been enough. We were all there together, after all.

The rally started—a mixture of cheers, punctuated by bouts of silence from a crowd that appeared uncertain of what to do next. Demonstrators shouted their adoration for celebrity speakers like Gloria Steinem, Michael Moore, and Ashley Judd. Though situated among vital voices from marginalized groups, the biggest voices were white ones. An hour passed, then another. More speakers, musical interludes. Those in attendance looked at their watches, waiting. I looked up at the signs, held aloft like pikes. *It's not Feminism if it's not Intersectional*, one read. I did not know whether this was lip service or a rallying call.

By the third hour, many of those assembled chanted, *Let us march, let us march*. I too was tired, my back ached from tensing against the shifting crowd. National Guard and paramedics ferried the ill through the throng, parting it for ambulances that crept forward like giant flashing snails. In the shuffle, I found Ksenia. We had been so close the whole time, but could not see one another because of the mob around us. *Let us march*. The words nearly drowned out the speakers.

Tamika Mallory, one of the national co-chairs took the podium.

“To those of you who have for the first time felt the pain that my people have felt since they were born here with chains shackled on our legs—today I say to you, welcome to my world,” she said.

Moved though I was, those words did not seem to sit well with many around me.

They began again, *let us march*. I too wanted to move, but the urgency of the narratives told on the stage held me there. Yet another hour passed. Though I am young, years of carrying half my body-weight in body armor and ammunition had ravaged my joints, which started to ache. I cannot imagine the pain of the elderly among us. Impatient voices became angry. Louder they said, *let us march*. Many did not carry the chant, yet it only took everyone else’s silence for a few to reenact the silencing of people of color, Muslims, and the LGBTQ community. What had they done to earn such ill treatment? It was imperative to stay and listen, yet I am ashamed that I wanted to leave and take to the streets. The anxious current infecting the thousands around me took a hold of me too. The women telling their stories asked of us a mere four hours of our time. The marginalized wait all their lives to be heard, and so many never live to have the chance.



ution will not be televised

Some booed as the organizers announced each subsequent performer and speaker. They booed before Alicia Keyes arrived on stage, but they cheered when they heard her name. When Janelle Monáe performed with the mothers of Eric Garner, Mohamed Bah, and Dontre Hamilton, everyone knew better than to chant or jeer, but it did not stop them from complaining, as if they were waiting too long for a cup of coffee rather than paying tribute to the women on stage. No one booed or chanted when Amy Schumer and Madonna took the stage. Some even yelled for people to lower their signs so they could see the performance. Madonna said she thought about blowing up the White House, but only a white person had the luxury of saying that without repercussion. I thought of what Tamika Mallory said.

“This is not a concert.”

Ksenia and I broke away to find our group. As everyone set off on the slow walk around the Mall, we left the rally like the recently concussed. I could not reconcile the words I heard on stage with the behavior of the throng. As we made our way to the rendezvous we passed through the crowds. I tried to chant, to rouse the crowd, but few followed my lead. A few demonstrators plugged their ears. Ksenia mused that she was not yet ready to be out as a veteran. Despite everything she suffered, everything she achieved, she felt she could not show the rest of the world who she was. I thought of the entitlement I had to wear my medals. To be a male veteran is acceptable. To be a woman veteran is transgressive. I wondered if blending in was a matter of survival for her, like my own habit of dialect hopping.

Ascending the low hill at the Washington Monument, I saw the immensity of the movement below us. The great swathes of humanity streaming through the Capitol's marble canyons resembled the masses fleeing strife across Africa and Asia for the unwelcoming shores of the West. Who would dare oppose such a force? Then, if the right wing vilified the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War Two, of course they would also vilify us. The light retreated from the day. Ksenia and I stood there, watched. An immigrant from the Soviet Union. A son of Vietnamese refugees. Vestiges of the last long struggle watching the embers of the next.

We found our group, after everything ended. We spent the night celebrating, commiserating, mourning. The fatigue of the day softened with the comfort of old friends and new comrades. The veterans of Common Defense spoke in practical terms—lessons learned, future collaborations, the long road ahead. Among that small group, I saw the vision for the march that felt so elusive during the rally. Women leading a movement, men in solidarity. People of the First Nations, people of color, Muslims, queer folks, alongside whites—united.

“Veterans issues are women’s issues,” one of the organizers

said to me. "When we talk about [Military Sexual Trauma], when we talk about the repeal of [Don't Ask Don't Tell], when we talk about women in combat, these are women's issues. These are veterans issues."

When I heard this, I felt so short sighted. I understood then, that whatever this movement becomes, we are no longer siloed into labels like *Anti-War*, *Racial Justice*, or even *White Feminism*. The old guard of activism must give way to this generation, a large interconnected spectrum all concerned with justice. We parted ways, and for the first time all day I felt hopeful that we would overcome.

I crossed the city to meet my college friends again. The drive took us across the city. Demonstrators continued marching in ragged informal lines. Trashcans brimmed with discarded signs. I met my friends at Comet, an establishment made famous by a fantastic scandal that began with wild speculation and ended with a deluded man armed with a weapon bent on violence. When I first heard of the so-called Pizza Gate scandal, I could not fathom why so many subscribed to such a spurious narrative. That folly felt little more than a fever dream that night. Protest signs leaned against every wall. Among the patrons, staff, my friends, I felt the relief of taking the first small steps down a long difficult path. Eyes ringed by fatigue from the march, everyone in our party welcomed sleep.

As we departed, the flashing lights of police cars and the garish banners of the Westboro Baptist church greeted us—*HOMO SEX IS SIN, Got AIDS Yet?* The police scrambled to get between the zealots and the Women's Marchers. Men yelled, by bullhorn, over the bullhorns. I thought to defy my old habits of resorting to anger. In Afghanistan, anger sustained me, protected me even. A policeman between us, I spoke to one of the men on the picket line. I asked to talk, to tell me why he was doing it on his terms. I told him that we were not so different, both Americans. I served for him to have freedom of speech, I said.

He called me crazy. Someone filmed the exchange, draping us in harsh white light. Another man screamed over my shoulder.

“That guy didn’t ever do shit for his country. He never had to give anything up.” He pointed at the evangelist, “Fuck you buddy.”

“Why am I crazy?” I said.

The man behind me pointed to a black church member.

“There’s some real self-hate going on there.”

The man behind me was white.



Westboro protesters at Comet Pizza

The evangelist ignored the commotion, gaze fixed on me. I remembered—these people protested soldiers’ funerals. Dead soldiers. These wild-eyed men with their long beards activated an old familiar heat in my chest. I moved through the crowd. Music played, and my friends dancing. Beat and rhythm carried

through the revelers like the sway of wind through water. Protest signs held aloft like boughs overhead. Rainbow flags like falling leaves. The man with the bullhorn singled people out, women he deemed un-weddable, men he called sexual deviants. They flipped him off, or cursed at him, but they kept their smiles, bodies still moving.

When it came my turn, the bullhorn man jabbed a finger at me.

“You, I know your kind. You’re doomed to hell. Hell waits for you.”

“I’ve been to hell,” I told him. “We had a name for people like you in Afghanistan—*munafiqeen*.” The false pious.

“Hell,” he went on, “hell for your kind.” I wanted to reach past the policemen, tear the beard from his face. After everything I gave, this is what I defended?

“You motherfucking Taliban.” I screamed back.

A woman chided me.

My anger broke. Present, but not blinding. Cooler now. Around me, that moment of rage did nothing to dampen the mood. Two women kissed. Children cavorted atop patio tables. This was what I hoped to return to after my war ended, yet in that moment I watched as if I never came home.

I drew back into the crowd, tried to unfold the seams of that brief glimpse back into my past. Against what did I swear to defend? Once, it was enemies from without, students of God hiding in the mountains. Yet, the Taliban never sought to destroy America. I learned over there that even the worst of them believed that they were simply defending against invaders. No, America’s real foes were always at home. The bigots, kleptocrats, and the new President among them. We must disabuse ourselves of biases, entitlement, alienation. The road ahead needs cooperation, joy, and compassion. If I am to

be ready for the future, I must defend against enemies domestic—at home in my cities and fields. Home in my heart of hearts.

Photo Credit: Drew Pham

Hierarchy and Americans, A Long Love Affair

We have leaders, in the USA, it's always been that way. I don't believe in some magical, fairyland communal or egalitarian America that was free from hierarchy. The settlers who occupied the land through Siberia and Asia did so in tribal societies some of which were patriarchies, and some of which were matriarchies. The invading Europeans all arrived from their own feudal or quasi-democratic traditions—they were not free from the assumptions or rules of their parents or grandparents, though they may have loathed them.

The original American settlers – whether the Native Americans or the Europeans – were all people who called someone master, and elevated that person above the rest, for a variety of reasons. They had to, in order to survive.

Even so, after several generations of European immigrants arrived in the late 18th century, and following certain intellectual innovations in political and moral thought in Europe, a choice was made. Many of the colonists decided to

create a new system of government, based on the idea that white, male humans all had some inherent dignity apart from their financial responsibilities. While that dignity has often been couched in financial terms, the original statement of human rights—*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*—is idealistic and totally (by luck or design) abstract.

Those white men revolted against their political masters, the kingdom of Great Britain. They fought British soldiers, German mercenaries, and neighbors who disagreed with them. With the help of France, the pro-humanism white supremacist European colonists won, and the United States of America was born.

Since then, people have extrapolated a great many things from that original idea about human dignity—that it should apply to non-white people, and also that it should apply to women. These notions seem self-evident to most today, but were not at the time. Every one of those social revelations (black humans are entitled to these rights, female humans are entitled to these rights, etc.) depends on a single, overwhelming and revolutionary idea: that government owes something to the people it serves, because it *is* the people it serves.

In the US, we have yet to reach even an approximation of that ideal. One reason behind this inability to think or view government as belonging to the people is that in word and thought, we consistently place ourselves below elected political representatives.

This problem comes down to an infatuation with hierarchy. No

single factor—not the electoral college, not gerrymandering, not money in politics—is more dangerous or damaging to democracy than the tolerance for giving titles and honorifics to people who serve as elected or appointed officials in whatever it is we call the American democratic experiment. “Secretary Clinton,” “President Trump,” “Senator Cotton,” “The Honorable Clarence Thomas.” Our use of titles—our enthusiastic desire to label and categorize damns us as authoritarian collaborators, as servile scum to be used and abused at any and every opportunity.

And abuse by the authorities is precisely what happens in America, routinely. Our elected leadership and their political appointees use and harm us. Who can blame them? We tell them that they’re powerful, and that exploitation is okay. Not just okay: good.

If we want to reform our system, the first thing to do is to strip every politician of their title. Him, her, they – the titles must go. In their place, we should mandate that they be addressed using insulting and offensive nicknames, the more humiliating the better, to be used whenever and wherever possible. The potential criticism that this is what Trump did to be elected might be countered by pointing out that now that he has become elected, he would be subjected to precisely the same obligatory disrespect he has encouraged, which seems like something he doesn't like.

More precisely, elected and appointed citizens with political power, for their part – members of Congress, judges, the President, members of the Presidential cabinet—should address every U.S. citizen as “sir” or “ma’am.” They must also say, upon greeting an American citizen: “you’re stronger, smarter,

and more beautiful/handsome than I am. Because I am weak and stupid and look like shit, like actual dogshit." If they fail to say this, it should be legal and necessary to kick them—not too hard, but not soft, either. In the ass—like they are a dog, that has annoyed you. When doing so, you (the citizen) must say something like "I'm kicking you with my foot instead of slapping you because one uses one's foot to kick a dog or some other unclean thing. I don't want to get my hand filthy by touching you." Elected representatives should address felons convicted of brutal and appalling crimes as "brother" or "sister." Nonviolent felons should be addressed as "sir" or "ma'am."

Elected representatives should be on a similar social plane as felons. If you don't agree with me, you're a coward, a fool, a slave, and you're destroying our democracy.

Why do our elected representatives need titles? What does it do for them? Is it necessary to remind them that they have power, or responsibility? No, that's a silly argument, obviously they have power and responsibility. They know that. What they don't know is that the power and responsibility is totally, completely contingent on their service to citizens. They forget this in the way that they speak to us, in the way that they live, in the influence they wield. They forget this, living in a democratic society, by insisting (institutionally, officially, or personally) that they be addressed by some form of title. That they believe honor or respect is their *due* as a Senator or Cabinet Member.

Absurd, untrue, obscene.

People in the military understand that they serve the country—they swear oaths to the same. They address civilians as “sir” and “ma’am” in part because doing so preserves the essential hierarchy of violence in America—citizens are above soldiers, politically and socially, and should be. In turn, soldiers are given some tangible benefits, while (in most practical terms) being treated like dogs, made to wear silly uniforms, and subjected to the real prospect of a quick death. We can do the same for elected and appointed representatives, but as the consequences are so much greater for the politicians who can do things like declare war or authorize military intervention, those politicians should be treated with accordingly less respect than soldiers.

I say “soldiers” because the proliferation of titles for different types of soldiers—“marines,” “sailors,” airmen” “SEALs” and so forth is more of this servile and appalling, totally inappropriate impulse to set apart and above. If you’re in the military, you’re a soldier. People who believe otherwise are willing idiots at best, and dangerous radicals at best, attempting to subvert and destroy democracy. Stop using any word other than “soldier,” immediately.

Furthermore, as much as Americans secretly despise soldiers—they do, unarguably, despise them, passionately and secretly, as all great passions are secret passions—soldiers are still offered a measure of public respect. Soldiers offer to die, which is pretty generous of them, considering, so they get monuments and speeches. Politicians never offer to die for their country, although we'd all be better off if most of them did—not offer, die, I mean—so we should give none of the tongue-in-cheek, superficial and almost entirely bogus support we say we give to “the troops” to politicians.

“Shitheel” or “Shit-for-brains” would be a good title for people serving in Congress. “Hey Shit-for-brains Cotton. You really have Shit-for-brains.” Whether you agree with Tom Cotton’s politics or not (I don’t, but that’s beside the point), you see the benefit. He remembers that in spite of his representing a constituency, it’s everyone’s duty to tell him what a total, complete, utter disgrace he is for being in politics. If you don’t like my example of Tom Cotton, don’t worry, it applies equally to Tammy Duckworth, someone for whom I have a great deal of respect, whose politics are 100% diametrically opposed to Cotton’s. Basically, pick someone in Congress today—anyone. It works.

Now, I don’t want to peg the title to a specific phrase—“Shit-for-brains” is insulting now, but give it a couple years and people would be trying to make it into a mark of honor or distinction. Really, people in Congress should just be called whatever you call a drunken, stupid, lying, criminal sack of decrepitude. Today it’s “shit-for-brains,” but tomorrow it could be something totally different.

The president would have a worse title, because the president has more power than any single congressperson. When addressing Congress, however, the president would obviously say “brothers” or “comrades” or “collectively, my equal.”

People who work for Congressmen and Congresswomen, as well as those working for a president’s cabinet or the President should not be addressed under any circumstances. They should be ignored, and if anyone hears them speaking, they should be kicked and called a dog, and otherwise belittled. If any of

these people acquire prominence simply by working with or for a powerful person—Clinton's aide Huma Abedin comes to mind as an excellent example of this, as do all of Trump's children and Obama's former Chief of Staff, Rahm Emmanuel—they can be kicked on sight. What happens later in their career does not matter, so that Rahm Emmanuel's becoming Mayor of Chicago does not mean he's suddenly immune to being kicked, or having voting-age citizens scream "you shit, you fucking worthless piece of shit, I own you" while kicking him, so close to Emmanuel that spit flies off their mouth and onto his face—no, that just means now he's Mayor of Chicago, but also these earlier bad things are still happening to him.

Caveat: as a politician you can't hit back or say anything while being kicked or screamed at except "I'm sorry, you're right citizen, I'm sorry." And it better fucking sound sincere.

Some Bullshit Counterarguments, Easily Dismissed

Here are some counterarguments against my wise scheme. Firstly, there could be concern that people elected or appointed to leadership positions would get depressed by getting called bad names or kicked, and do a worse job—especially without any positive reinforcement. I would point out that in the military, especially during training, I and every other soldier in training were subjected to every horrible name one can imagine and worse, and made to know both that we had no right to expect anything, but also that what we were doing was very important. What I saw in training and at

the unit level, on a tactical level, was that the very best people did not care about what they were called, and worked very hard to earn the respect of their peers. Only when you got away from that small, personal level, only when you left "the tribe" did things begin to break down, did rank and tabs or awards become more important than actions. In any case, I did not see verbal abuse as dissuading good people from working hard—in fact, it seemed like a stimulant.

Another counterargument could be that using vile language to describe American leadership would encourage citizens to do actual violence to them, or to murder them. This is an excellent point, but not, I think, a counterargument. On the contrary, I believe that if a clever human like Hillary Clinton had been called "Shit-for-brains" or "garbage-taint-scumheart" or whatever else people wanted instead of "Madam Secretary," it could have helped guide her political evolution in a more productive direction than the trashcan of history, where she and her philosophy have ended up. Ditto Donald Trump, obviously.

In other words, the violence of words would signal in plain language to officials that, in fact, they were, at all times, very close to their end, and that, [like the character of Nick the Greek in *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*](#), they'd have to work very, very hard to avoid that actual (rather than threatened) end.

Another criticism could be that this practice or habit would lead to an increase in violence in society overall, and a desire to use harmful language in general. I don't think this is a valid criticism, because people tend not to enjoy using violence under any circumstances—violence is profoundly

unsettling. People who love hierarchy want us to believe that the alternative to hierarchy is violence, but of course that assertion is as hypothetical as the assertion that communism is practical. The requirement to describe elected leadership and their political representatives as "Shit-for-brains" or "Shit-soul" or "Stupid-Fascist-Fuckup-Fucker" would not suddenly result in many people cursing in public all the time. Rather, it would serve as a kind of caution to everyone living in the society: but for the grace of god and hubris, there go I. Furthermore, human decency would protect those elected leaders who truly worked for the people from the worst outrages. Politicians would see that working for the *good* rather than for each other or themselves would result in ameliorated negative interactions. Rather than curse at them in public or in private, citizens would just try to ignore interacting with them in general, so as not to hurt their feelings or stop the good work they were doing. This would only happen with the best of them, though. The sign of a great leader would be that people only grudgingly (rather than enthusiastically) made remarks that in other circumstances would be slanderous about their person and personal lives. Good leaders would be allowed to do their good work.

A final counterargument would be that this situation would dissuade people from getting into politics. I disagree—I think it would dissuade all but the most sturdy people from getting into politics, people who do not depend on titles and honorifics to describe their authority as do our cousins in Europe or Asia or Africa. If you don't mind getting called every horrible, insulting phrase under the sun—if you don't mind hearing your mother and father and sister and brother and wife and children abused in the most horrifying, borderline criminal, graphic detail imaginable, politics shouldn't be for you. If you want someone to address you as "Ambassador such-and-such" or "Secretary so-and-so" or "Mr./Mrs. President,"

there are many other countries in the world that will accommodate this type of (to my American thinking) nauseating pander: this should not be how we do things in America. Bowing and scraping and elevating the most servile and precious, the most proud among us to positions of leadership—it is below us, individually and collectively.

Let's choose instead to call our elected leadership and their political appointees what they are: shit-for-brains, asshole-grease. Down with hierarchy, up with democracy!

The Long March Ahead: A Veteran's Place in Resistance

The day after the election felt all too familiar. It felt like 9/11. Then, as now, that day only promised a long road ahead. The years that followed, I dreaded a war I felt duty bound to fight. I was only twelve on 9/11, but I came from a family of Vietnamese refugees, for whom war and resistance is as much a part of the fabric of our lives as family reunions and weddings. We have always fought for whichever country we called home, Vietnam under the French, both the communist north and American-backed south, and now the United States. My brother and I both fought in Afghanistan, and my family shed no tears when we deployed because for us it was inevitable—we fight.

Before all of that, on 9/11, amidst the anguish and strife, I somehow had the presence of mind to think:

Welcome to the rest of the world, America.

I thought the same thing the day Trump claimed victory. Yugoslavia came to mind that morning. My friend Sara, a Croatian-American writer, likened a [Trump presidency to the election of Slobodan Milošević](#). The hate-speech and ultra-nationalism of the Trump Campaign were the same starting points for ethnic cleansing and genocide in the Yugoslav wars. To many, Yugoslavia was once a paragon of multi-culturalism, but we witnessed a model society descend into conflict distinguished by crimes against humanity. In *Love Thy Neighbor*, Peter Maas writes that before the Bosnian War started, Yugoslavs thought the brazen inhumanity that occurred would be impossible. They satirized and lampooned the idea of a civil war on national TV. All it took were a few—a small, cursed, hateful few—to throw a once great nation into turmoil.

My wife and I spent the whole day texting, asking, *what are we going to do?* She told me that she wasn't going to be one of those Jews that waited in Berlin until the day they put her onto a train; she wasn't going to just wait and see. Some part of me wondered if we were being irrational, these epigenetic memories of pogroms and falling napalm—surely these nightmares would never come to fruition? We have middle class jobs, a rent-stabilized apartment, we vote in local elections—surely it would never come to violence? I asked myself if everything I worked towards—my art, my family, my dreams—would be cut short by another conflict. The soldier in me yearned for the comfort my M4 carbine gave me in Afghanistan, but I didn't fight for an America ruled by the rifle rather than the ballot.

I was told by white men in my life to be patient, wait for the smoke to clear because it cannot be as bad as everyone thinks. One man told me that the campaign's bigotry might subside, that it was only a tactic to get into power. He said that the adult thing to do now was to build bridges, as if my anger at the election's result was childish—now wasn't the time to take up arms. I remember thinking that no one would come for him

for being the wrong skin color, for saying the wrong thing.

I knew then that resistance was my only option. I struggled with that decision. I wondered if I was just contributing to a deeper division in a country that seemed split nearly straight down the middle. Right wrong or indifferent, we elected Trump president—by action or inaction, we are all responsible. Yet it can't be just about healing, because the people that brought Trump to power seem to have little interest in bridging the divide given the uptick in hate-speech.

My wife and I took to the streets Wednesday, the ninth of November alongside thousands. We flooded Union Square. A city in despair called out, voices echoing through glass and concrete canyons. Those voices became one. Though we disrupted the organized chaos of Manhattan rush hour, bystanders cheered us from their city buses, honked their horns in solidarity, even joined us. Rain fell, but we were warm. When the night was over, I felt purged of despair. I am wary of emotionally cathartic experiences, because poverty, illness, and war have taught me that catharsis can be a cheap illusion, but I thought I felt something genuine.

That Saturday, I marched again. There were thousands more demonstrators on Fifth Avenue, where veterans had paraded with their flags and patriotic banners just the day before. There was something subdued about the demonstration, contained—police barriers formed a fence between us and pedestrians shopping at upscale retailers or couples leaving from brunch. The mass of protestors stretched for dozens of city blocks—it was hard to see where the huddled bodies began and ended, but there were times when the slogans and chanting stopped, falling into a cowed silence. It had only been a few days, and I worried that the collective passion that compelled us to gather had somehow subsided.

The closer we came to Trump's tower, the closer the police hemmed us in. A block away, the demonstrators were penned in

on all sides by barricades. I speculated on how many of the men and women the NYPD would be called on to enforce the systemic cleansing of the country proposed by Trump and his cohort. How many would relish it? Would I count them among the enemy soon?

It's just a job, most of the officers said when I asked them why they joined the force.

The black officers laughed when we started chanting, *Fuck Giuliani*.

I told one sergeant from the Seven-Seven out of Prospect Heights that I was sorry they had to spend their Saturday out here.

"At least it gets us out of Brooklyn," he said.

When we reached the police blockade below that glaring, obsidian edifice, Trump supporters—young men in their twenties perhaps—heckled the crowd. These men—or boys—were not the white working-class poor, those rust-belt disenfranchised that the new media looked to scapegoat after the election. They were patricians, dressed in expensive oxford shirts and high-end outdoor jackets. I can't remember what they said; I just remember their smug self-assuredness. While the others around me tried to ignore them, I yelled back. I wore a hat that read *Operation Enduring Freedom Veteran*, with a Combat Action Badge embroidered at the center.

"Motherfucker," I said, "why don't you go down to the recruiting station and put your money where your mouth is."

While his friends backed down, one of them leaned over the barricade and shouted louder. I didn't hear what he said over the sound of my own voice responding in kind. As we marched past I slung insult after insult until they were out of sight. I used my status as a veteran to humiliate him, and some part of me is ashamed, because I forgot that I didn't just fight

for my idea of what America should be, but his as well.

By that point, my friends were tired and hungry. Everyone's enthusiasm had dissipated. As we wriggled out of the pen, street vendors hawked cheap light-up toys out of granny carts and high-school kids took selfies, while an activist festooned with leftist pins and patches performed for a news anchor on the other side of the corral.

Free of the crowd, I watched the spectacle from the perspective of the cameras and passers-by. I remembered that they protested in Yugoslavia too, but tens of thousands had to die before Milošević was brought to justice. Almost everyone hoped for a peaceful resolution—everyone but the ultranationalists who laid their genocidal plans. In *Love Thy Neighbor*, Maas captured the laments of Bosnians caught unprepared for the violence that would beset them for nearly three years. As I watched the crowd disperse, I wondered if I too would be caught underprepared—outgunned, outmanned, starving. I wondered how many of these women and men around me would be willing to take up arms. Perhaps my greatest asset as a veteran was my capacity for violence, my ability to fight and kill, but the idea dismayed me.

When my train crossed the Manhattan Bridge, my wife texted me.

Traffic is totally fucked on bway/ in the 20s

Good job ☐

Social media, the news, my friends—they all noticed the stand against hate. The whole country watched—continues to watch those that struggle for equality. I understood then that as a veteran, I am not an asset because of my capacity for destruction. We veterans seeking to fulfill our country's promise of liberty and justice for all are assets because of our capacity to organize. Going forward, we must exercise and teach our acumen for strategic decision-making, our ability to marshal resources, our ability to lead. If America is to

resist the threat of mass deportation, hate crimes, and free-speech suppression, it will need its veterans.

Perhaps the day will come when we must defend our communities against violence, but violence is a tool of last resort. We would do well to remember that organizations like the Black Panther Party, Young Lords, and the American Indian Movement were populated and led by veterans who sought to build community, contrary to the popular narrative that they were terror organizations. Veterans are already standing up to Trump's vision for America. Organizations like [Common Defense](#) are speaking out against misogyny and homophobia, and [Veterans for Peace](#) are standing in solidarity with Muslim Americans in their #vetsvshate social-media campaign.

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Professor and Albert Einstein Institution founder Gene Sharp outlined [198 methods of non-violent action](#) to resist the threat of hate looming before us. For now, mass protests are important to show the country how many of us oppose racism, sexism, and homophobia, but there is more work to be done. What stands out about these methods is that in aggregate they amount to the formation of an alternative society. Nonviolent methods can be performed by any of us, from members of the government to workers and consumers. Sharp's protégé Jamilia Raqib gave a [TED talk](#) on using these nonviolent methods to disrupt and ultimately dismantle tyrannical regimes like Daesh, but they could easily be applied to a Trump autocracy. She says, "The greatest hope for humanity lies not in condemning violence but in making violence obsolete." Our country needs us again, whether infantry, mechanics, or logisticians—our skills can build that alternative society together.

There is already so much hate in our country, and those of us who fought know that war is not a vicious cycle, but a downward spiral. The challenge before us is not to respond to hate with violence, but to foster a society that values community above enmity. My friend, Ali Dineen, a musician and

activist, told me that we should not seek to call our adversaries out; rather we should call them in. I might have asked that Trump supporter to talk instead of berate him. I might have simply asked him what his name was, undoing bigotry is a long process that starts with a [conversation](#). In the coming years I fear that resistance may come to mean armed conflict, and though my soldier's heart sometimes yearns to fight again, I don't want to fight my own countrymen. Violence can only deepen the deep divide in America, but making violence obsolete, having a vision for the future that includes our enemies, that kind of resistance can bridge the divide in our country. I spent four years in the Army practicing the art of war; now in revolt, I have the chance to build rather than destroy.

Photo Credit: Ken Shin

Correction: A previous version of this essay stated that Gene Sharp was a professor at NYU.

Last Week This Week 7-24-16: Donald Trump Edition

Wrath /ræθ/ *noun*

1□: strong vengeful anger or indignation□
(chiefly used for humorous or rhetorical effect)

2□: retributory punishment for an offense or a crime: divine chastisement□

On WBT

David James discussed [Plato's Republic](#) and how it relates to Donald Trump—namely, what kind of leader and democracy do we really want?

Adrian Bonenberger writes [live from Ukraine](#), where an expected Russian Orthodox Church "March for Peace" might turn out to be something straight out of the Russian dictator's playbook.

Editor's Recommendations

Trump and Foreign Relations

Speaking of Putin, distinguished historian and expert in Eastern Europe, Timothy Snyder, has written [a fascinating, and scary, article](#) about how Putin is an ideal model for Trump.

[Franklin Foer at Slate](#): "Vladimir Putin has a plan for destroying the West, and it looks a lot like Trump." Lots of research and detail here.

The same author earlier this year [profiled Trump's new campaign manager](#), a certain Paul Manafort. The man has apparently worked for two dozen dictators in a long career which is almost unbelievably devoid of humanity or morality of any kind.

Trump as the Republican Party's Frankenstein's Monster

Norm Ornstein and Thomas Mann [detail in great depth](#) how the Republican Party laid the groundwork for a no-nothing populist demagogue by waging war on government itself for three decades.

Trump, The Sociopath

Trump's [ghostwriter](#) regrets his part in painting a myth shrouding a deeply troubled man.

Trump's Character

There is not enough time in the day to list all the ways Trump is a flawed candidate, but [this article](#) does a great job summarizing how much he has faked out the Republican Party for his own egotistical ends.

Matt Taibbi at Rolling Stone with a laugh-out-loud, over-the-top [annihilation](#) of everything Trump is and represents.

Trump Satire

Remember that Christmas classic cartoon, How the Grinch Stole Christmas? It taken't take much changes by [College Humor](#) to rework the orange Trump monster into something scarier than the Grinch.

The office of American President is too much power and work for a single person. Donald Trump does not want to do any work but wants to be a figure-head. [This ingenious article](#) shows how we can kill two birds with one stone by reforming the American political system. All hail, King Trump!

On Plato, Donald Trump, and the Ship of State

Plato's most famous work and the foundational text of political philosophy is the *Republic*. Written in the form of a dialogue between Socrates and other real-life Athenians, the book opens with a discussion about the nature of justice and then proceeds into Plato's ideas about what an ideal state and its leader would look like. I will argue how these ideas are still relevant nowadays, especially regarding the disturbing

state of American politics in which the American people are considering electing for the first time an openly authoritarian leader who is blatantly unqualified for the job.

Plato, an aristocrat, held a deep antipathy for democracy; he had lived through the defeat of Athens at the hand of Sparta as well as the condemnation of his mentor, Socrates. He blamed democracy for these twin catastrophes. His own ideal state would actually bear strong resemblance to Sparta—a totalitarian state in which a small elite trained for success in battle, the majority were disenfranchised slaves who did all the labor, and all cultural activities were forbidden. Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* summarized Plato's *Republic* as follows:

“When we ask: what will Plato's Republic achieve? The answer is rather humdrum. It will achieve success in wars against roughly equal populations, and it will secure a livelihood for a certain small number of people. It will almost certainly produce no art or science, because of its rigidity; in this respect, as in others, it will be like Sparta. In spite of all the fine talk, skill in war and enough to eat is all that will be achieved. Plato had lived through famine and defeat in Athens; perhaps, subconsciously, he thought the avoidance of these evils the best that statesmanship could accomplish.”

Russell goes on in his criticism, answering the question of how and why Plato could have achieved such greatness despite having, frankly, mostly terrible ideas:

“Plato possessed the art to dress up illiberal suggestions in such a way that they deceived future ages, which admired the *Republic* without ever becoming aware of what was involved in its proposals. It has always been correct to praise Plato, but not to understand him. This is the common fate of great men. My object is the opposite. I wish to understand him, but to treat him with as little reverence as if he were a

contemporary English or American advocate of totalitarianism.”

Plato's Non-Ideal Republic in Practice

Indeed, the millennia of admiration for Plato's *Republic* came to a sudden end when Russell's *History* and Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* were published in the same year—1945. No coincidence that both were written during the Second World War at the height of the destruction wrought by demented dictators and dangerous ideas. Popper's was perhaps the first, and still most important work, that separates Plato from the humanistic and democratic ideas of Socrates, and shows rather that Plato's ideal state was a totalitarian one. The overriding theme of the book, which follows the thread of totalitarianism from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Marx, is how all these philosophers relied on historicism, a false theory in which history unfolds according the universal laws, to enable dangerous ideas to follow. He accused all of these thinkers of being partially culpable in leading Europe towards the crisis of leadership and war contemporaneous with the book's publishing. Popper argues instead for a strong defense of the open society, which protects liberal values and institutes reforms without violence. One relevant issue Popper also discusses is the [Paradox of Intolerance](#), which says that for an Open Society to flourish, we must not be tolerant of intolerance (which include the type of hate speech, bigotry, and violent rhetoric that is becoming normalized in Donald Trump's Republican Party).

The most famous parable from the *Republic* is that of The Cave, whose premise about Plato's theory of ideas most undergraduates would be familiar. Much more useful, in my opinion, however, is the parable of the Ship of State. Imagine the state as a ship, whose captain is a skilled stargazing navigator. The citizens are sailors, who may have many various

skills but are not qualified to pilot the ship, especially through rough weather. The sailors mock the captain and try to replace him, but ultimately he is the only one with the ability to lead them. In Plato's view, the captain in a state should be a philosopher-king, wise and trained at birth for his position as total ruler. One sees that democracy and Plato do not mix well—for him, the people were a mob who could not rule themselves.

Let's bring these analogies into present day America.

As far as I can tell, America is the longest running large democracy in history, though a number of smaller polities, such as Iceland or the old Iroquois Confederation, to name two, are certainly older. For a huge and diverse nation of over 300 million people that has the world's largest economy and strongest military, the fact that it has survived 240 years and a bloody civil war without ever deviating from a democratic and peaceful transition of power is quite amazing. Unprecedented actually. It was taken for granted when the Founding Fathers drew up the Constitution that Athenian-style democracy could only ever end in manipulation of the mob, or *demos*, by a demagogue or tyrant. They drew up a system of checks and balances between branches of government in which no person could amass enough power to take over the government, and through which change would necessarily be slow and conservative. This has often frustrated the ability to pass needed reforms, but has also the greater benefit of preserving the system peacefully.

Past American Presidents

Never in American history, discounting the obvious case of the Civil War, has the original political system drawn up in the Constitution come under threat of being radically altered.

Likewise, there has never been a single person in American history who has had the power, or even sought the power, to completely control government in anything even resembling a dictatorship. Out of all the 44 presidents (Grover Cleveland served non-consecutive terms and is counted twice), historians typically agree on Andrew Johnson as the worst. It was certainly Abraham Lincoln's biggest mistake to name him his Vice President for short-sighted and unnecessary electoral reasons before his reelection, and Johnson's horrible term had awful ramifications for the next century regarding the reconstruction of the South. Even so, it is hard to find any American president who was unqualified to hold the office, in the traditional sense of having the ability and experience to operate an executive organization with delegated tasks and many moving parts. This has nothing to do with ideology, or even effectiveness, but of basic qualifications for the job before taking office. Several highly successful generals had either mostly good, mixed, or awful administrations (Eisenhower, Jackson, and Grant, for example), but their qualifications were never questioned despite their success or lack thereof. Herbert Hoover is generally considered an awful president mostly due to the Great Depression beginning on his watch, but he was highly successful in his private career and as the head of the U.S. Food Administration during WWI and Secretary of Commerce under two presidents before being elected, and was thus very qualified. Even George W. Bush, whom [historians](#) will most likely rank closer to Andrew Johnson than Franklin Roosevelt, governed the second largest state before becoming president. Most presidents have been highly educated and experienced men (obviously all men to date) with military backgrounds and terms as senators, congressmen, or governors. Men who understood something about the world and also how government works at various levels. The most successful presidents have also had temperaments suited for the rigorous stressfulness of this unique position as well as the ability to listen to advisors and learn from mistakes. To have a combination of many of these rare skills is what is

wanted in a president, as well as a certain degree of other abstract qualities like intellectual curiosity, integrity, and empathy.

The Ideal Leader in a Democracy

Basically, I would argue that we want the same thing today as Plato wanted, even if we have different ways of going about it. Even if they will not be philosopher-kings, our leaders should be the best among us, and chosen by an informed electorate. They should be highly skilled at steering the large and unwieldy ship of state even in the rough waters of domestic and international politics. Plato, a member of the hereditary aristocracy and an anti-democrat, thought that these leaders should be bred from birth for the role, with the rest of the people having no say in the matter. There is another meaning of aristocracy, which is merely “rule by the best”, not involving genetics or inheritance but pure merit through earned experience, training, and natural character, and selected for by the majority of citizens. In our democracy, even with the two major political parties nominating candidates for the office of president, there has long been a de facto sorting out of the best qualified candidates. Once again, this has nothing to do with ideology but of basic minimum ability to function in a very complex role. Despite differences in ideas by the parties and the electorate, there has always been a tacit understanding that the winner will uphold the duties of his office and continue to serve in the government for the people.

The Disqualification of Donald Trump

Thus, we have never before in American history been in the position we are currently in—namely, to have a major party candidate for president who is clearly and without any doubt

unqualified and unsuited for the office that he seeks. The Republican Party, once a bastion of principled conservatism, respect for law, and personal responsibility, has become so [radical and reactionary](#) over the last three decades or so that it has nominated a person who would certainly be the most disastrous, irresponsible, and unqualified president in history, and the closest we have yet come to a dictator, however petty. Trump's open disregard for the rule of law, free press, and clear lack of basic knowledge of the world and the government he would operate is a disqualification for president. His [other temperamental flaws](#), his proudly open bigotry (the likes of which has not been seen in a major candidate since there was legal slavery), his shocking, world historical level of narcissism and mendacity (unprecedented even for a would-be politician), and other shallow but toxic policy ideas are almost beside the point—any one of these attributes should easily have disqualified Trump from coming anywhere near being an realistic candidate for president, but the ultimate fact that he has none of the necessary tools to meet the minimum standards for piloting the ship of state is the single most important fact. He is not trained or experienced in anything like running the executive branch of the richest and strongest military power on Earth. He has shown no ability to succeed in anything other than making his own name universally known, however he goes about that. He is not a stargazer who can pilot America through bad storms, nor is he someone who should have instant control over soldiers' lives and nuclear weapons.

The Republican Party, for the first time in American history, has failed in the basic task of nominating a human who is at a basic level of qualification for the office of president. There is no need to get any more into the details of how and why this happened--[this article](#) gives a brief summary of how the Republican Party began moving rightward three decades ago and cynically cultivating deep distrust of government itself for its own electoral gain, and this is the result. The most

important thing is that Trump be defeated at all costs, and that a strong warning is cried out that never again will we the American people tolerate such a denigration of our hallowed tradition for maintaining a functioning democracy, whatever differences of policy and ideology. I disagree with Plato's sentiment that democracy is a bad thing. It is not a perfect system; it is merely less bad than every other possible system. Its strength, and also its only flaw, is that it ultimately depends on an electorate that votes in the best interests of the peaceful and prosperous survival of the state, and not on a single tyrant who manipulates the mob with promises to solve all problems on his own. Let's hope that we can continue for at least another 240 years without such a threat and an affront to our great country.

Republican Reactionaries and the Road to Fascism



The Utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote the following lines in his great work *On Liberty*: “A party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life.” Mill, a Member of Parliament with the Liberal Party, was a proponent of almost unlimited personal and economic freedom—a platform that is actually a traditionally conservative one, and which has some parallels with Libertarianism. The problem with the Republican Party is that has not been fulfilling its role as the party of order and stability for quite some time (let's say the Eisenhower years, which were really just eight years of very moderate Conservatism sandwiched between four

decades of Liberal dominance). It has degenerated into a radical party that wants to conserve nothing except the sundry privileges accumulated to its business allies, at the expense of a majority of its own members and the population at large. Due to the unfortunate fact that America only sustains two political parties, that one of them has become a completely disordered mess is creating huge ramifications for every aspect of public policy and the general welfare. Let us discuss in greater detail the specifics of the problem and some possible solutions.

Disclaimer: I do not consider myself conservative on any issue except regarding the environment, and I am strongly against almost every aspect of the current Republican Party platform. On the other hand, I do not by any means consider myself a supporter of the Democratic Party and I think the stink of political corruption wafts from them almost as much as Republicans. It does happen that I find much more overlap with some Democratic policy positions than their rivals, but for the most part, given the limitations of the aforementioned two-party political system, I believe it imperative that Republican power and control remain as limited as possible at least until its existential crisis abates. I will state my reasons for this below.

Though I am not myself a conservative, I actually want the Republican Party to fix itself and solve many of the problems besetting it; I am not afraid of Conservatism, but I am afraid of even more political power falling into the hands of a deeply radical and reactionary party that is fighting hard to reject the reality of the modern world and to deny truth, even in its scientific and purely objective forms. Even though it does not hold the office of the President (though within the Executive branch it is likely that a large majority of legal and law enforcement personnel are in fact Conservative), the Republican Party controls the other two-thirds of the Federal Government (both Houses of Congress and the Supreme Court) and

roughly that proportion of state and local governments. My argument is not that it is inherently bad in a democracy that one party should control a majority of political power at any given time. In a true democracy this should be a common enough event and one which can be reversed at any time if said party loses favor with enough citizens. In those cases, the voters oust that party as a referendum on its actual governance. Soon enough, the tables inevitably flip and it happens in reverse.

No, my argument, rather, is two-fold: (1) The way political power is allocated is actually deeply anti-democratic (due to the corrupt process of gerrymandering districts in Congress; the Electoral College for the Presidency; and the unelected, life-serving terms of the Supreme Court); and that (2) the Republican Party is not upholding its role as the conservative party of order and stability, à la Mill, but increasingly committed to tapping into the negative emotional space that bubbles under the surface of society from whence springs fascism and authoritarianism.

Looking again briefly at my first point, both parties are equally to blame for the undemocratic nature of American politics, as are voters themselves for not demanding change (this will be the only time I will cite the common mainstream media canard that “both parties are equal;” they are not, as we will see, except for the not altogether insignificant lengths to which they both go in corruption and cheating to win—it must be said, however, that Republicans are much more successful in the latter). It is a result of several factors, including pure luck, that the latest beneficiary of the gerrymandering lottery was the Republican Party, which happened to have a good election result in a low-turnout midterm election of 2010, which came directly after the decennial census, and thus gave more redistricting power to that party for the next decade (until the next census, which will again benefit one or the other of the two parties).

Quick note on voter turnout: Obama was elected in 2008 with an

overall voter turnout of 57% of the voting-age population, and that is the highest percentage since the 1960s! In the off-year midterm elections the percentage of voting-age population has held steady at around 37% also since the 1960s. Keep in mind that the entire House of Representatives, one third of the Senate, nearly half of state governors, and similarly high numbers of state legislatures are all elected during these midterm years, which means that barely over one third of population ever cares to have a say in creating a representative government when there is not a president on the ballot. Voter apathy and ignorance is a plague on democracy, and the fact that only just over half of citizens bother to cast a vote is beyond shameful. As for the Republicans, it is well-known and readily admitted by them that they benefit from lower voter turnout. To this end, they actively conspire to reduce voter turnout by any means necessary, especially in places with higher populations of minorities, students, and other groups that generally vote for Democrats. A few of their tools in the lowering of voter turnout toolkit include: requiring only certain types of ID for voting wherever possible, limiting the places where people can obtain these IDs, limiting the time of voting to a single Tuesday in November when people are working and which is difficult, especially for poorer people, to take time off work to vote. Election Day should be a national holiday as it is in many other democracies (here is a [petition](#), for example, calling for the President to make Election Day a national holiday), and at a minimum expanded to an election week so everyone has a convenient opportunity to exercise their constitutional right to vote.

To further illustrate the extent of undemocratic elections and gerrymandering, consider connections between the following facts: Obama was elected twice with over 51% of the national popular vote each time, yet Republicans took control of Congress in 2010 by a huge margin, despite receiving one and a half million less votes than Democrats. Then, Republicans held

control of Congress in 2012 despite receiving about half a million less votes than Democrats. That half-a-million-vote deficit somehow earned Republicans 38 more seats in the House of Representatives, and the explanation is gerrymandering. In Pennsylvania, Obama won by 5 percent, but Republicans somehow still won 13 out of 18 House seats; in Ohio, Obama won by 2 percent but Republicans somehow still won 12 out of 16 House seats; in North Carolina, Democrats won 51 percent of the total votes but only 4 out of 13 House seats. It is the same story in many other states and, with a few exceptions, has benefitted mostly Republicans.

The problem is compounded if we consider the highly undemocratic nature of the Senate, in which, for example, a senator from Wyoming represents something like 200,000 people while one from California represents something like 20,000,000 people, and where even a minority of 40 percent of these already unrepresentative senators can block legislation from proceeding. This is just a brief outline of a few of the systemic problems afflicting the increasingly sickly nature of American "democracy," and it is something that highly troubles me. You see, the best guarantee of a continuing free and open society is a well- or at least moderately - functioning democratic apparatus, but some of the trends have been moving away from this, and this is by design of political operators. When democracy breaks down, it has the potential to enter a downward spiral exploited by demagogues and to end up somewhere no one intended originally: a dictatorship, fascist or otherwise.

For my second point, the Republican Party will receive fully 100 percent of my accusation, which is the following: The Republican Party has abdicated its role as the conservative protector of order and stability in a *de facto*, if not *de jure*, binomial political party equation. The winds of political change and fortune have always blown hither and thither in modern states, with periods of reform or even

revolution followed by periods of relatively ordered, if not perfect or universally free, stability and order. I am of the belief that revolution is highly counterproductive unless it happens in a society already ruled by a heavy-handed dictator or where rights are so trampled on or non-existent as to drive the people to desperation (witness the beginnings of the Syrian Civil War, for example). This is not the case in America or in any other Western country. I also believe that, so long as things remain imperfect in our society (which will be for the foreseeable future), the best course of action is incremental but constant reform in order to improve the healthy functioning of all aspects of society for the largest number of people.

Therefore, so long as things are not perfect and there exists no immediate threat of dictatorship, I see no need to fight for the preservation of order and stability that is the *raison d'être* of traditional Conservatism. On the other hand, I very much want the opposing side of the political spectrum to be represented by pragmatic and reasonable persons who clearly embody the case for Conservatism as a bulwark against violent revolution, in the tradition of Burke or some other such theorist following in the wake of *la Terreur*. I understand that there is a certain intellectual case to be made for Conservatism, though I personally find it distasteful to follow its logical consequences, which is that the status quo will not improve and perfect our society, but rather, it will only hinder and further corrupt it. I also think the nature of Conservatism is itself arbitrary and hypocritical, in that it makes choices about what to conserve and what to do away with; such choices often spring from personal greed and short-term gain. I respectfully decline the intellectual allure of Conservatism, with the key word being "respect". I understand and sympathize with my fellow liberal-minded and progressive reformists of the following quotations: John Stuart Mill, again (I previously wrote on Mill's Utilitarian philosophy [here](#)), who said in a debate with a Conservative MP in 1866, "I

did not mean that Conservatives are generally stupid; I meant, that stupid persons are generally Conservative. I believe that to be so obvious and undeniable a fact that I hardly think any honorable gentleman will question it;" Mark Twain, who said, "Conservatism is the blind and fear-filled worship of dead radicals;" Franklin Roosevelt, who said, "A conservative is a man with two perfectly good legs who, however, has never learned to walk forward;" and John Kenneth Galbraith, who said, "The modern conservative is engaged in one of man's oldest exercises in moral philosophy; that is, the search for a superior moral justification for selfishness." (Quick aside on the last quote: it cannot be denied the influence of the charlatan philosopher of greed and selfishness Ayn Rand on Republicans; the newest Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, has repeatedly [cited his dogmatic belief](#) in her creed, and he is one of many).

In all of these quotes there is, in my opinion, more than just a grain of truth, but it is perhaps the humorist Twain who said it best (just as the comedians of today are the ones doing the most to expose political hypocrisy and idiocy): Today's Republican Party not only worships dead radicals, the foremost being Ronald Reagan, but its members have become thoroughly radical and reactionary themselves. Radical in the sense that they want to completely upend a system which has been incrementally built up over decades, especially since the New Deal of FDR, by extreme and sweeping measures; and reactionary in the sense that they want to radically change the system to return to the status quo ante, which basically means to go back to a time when the government was weaker and indifferent to the suffering of huge numbers of citizens, and when industrial barons had a free hand to monopolize and control most of the economy. This is to say, the state of the world directly before Europe's great failed experiment with fascism. The combination of radical reaction is the most dangerous I can think of in a political party, and one which leads to state or corporate fascism (compare these quotes by

Mussolini: "Fascism is reaction" and "Fascism should more appropriately be called Corporatism because it is a merger of state and corporate power.") Here is an abbreviated list of examples of the Republican platform that reveal it as the furthest thing from a conservative party of order and stability, but rather one that has become wholly hypocritical, corrupt, logically inconsistent, radical, reactionary, xenophobic, anti-science, and anti-humanistic:

One: 97 percent of scientists agree, but the Republicans stand alone even among the Conservative parties of other developed countries in rejecting the existence of climate change or completely discounting even the possibility that it has been even partially caused by human activity. A conservative position should be to protect and *conserve* the planet and its people and resources as much as possible, no matter the cause or extent of the problem. Nowhere in the preservation of order and stability is it called for to totally deny reality. This one is easy, but of the utmost importance given the lengths to which Republicans go to protect the outdated fossil fuel economy at the cost of the future inhabitability of our planet.

Two: Through the efforts of past activists and the policies of a few prescient politicians (both Roosevelts, to name two), America built up a large, prosperous middle class that enriched the whole society and ensured relative peace and prosperity more than had previously been seen. A conservative position would be to maintain the policies that had helped build up and protect the majority of America's workers and society. The Republicans, rather, have long since become economic radicals favoring policies that take from the middle and lower classes to benefit the rich, all under the guise of the now widely-discredited but still spouted ideology of "supply-side economics." At one time, even thoroughly "establishment" Republicans like George H.W. Bush (probably also the last non-reactionary Republican) called out this hoax

of a policy as ["voodoo economics"](#), but today the belief is as much an article of faith as any that you will find in the Republican platform. Any number of changes to the tax code advocated by Republicans will all make the fabulously rich even richer at the expense of the now-shrinking middle class and the growing and perpetually undiscussed lower class (which we're told is not supposed to exist in America).

Three: A truly conservative party would seek to protect the individual freedoms that are enshrined in the U.S. Bill of Rights, but on all sides these freedoms are perverted and exploited for corrupt political gains. Freedom of Speech, the most sacred of our rights, has been, in a gross twist of logic, expanded by the Supreme Court to include money itself, in the case of political [donations](#). This, in a very real sense, makes Freedom of Speech not free at all, but very expensive and weighted towards the rich and powerful whose agenda is further enrichment and preservation of an unjust system. A true conservative would want to preserve the sanctity of "one person one vote," even when it goes against her interest, but in reality the radical anti-democratic apparatchiks have enabled money to further corrupt the already (as we have seen) undemocratic system of American politics by allowing unlimited money to flow into endless campaigns by highly vested billionaires. Just as a Wyoming and California Senator are highly unrepresentative by definition, now every politician has become exponentially more unrepresentative, seeing as they are free to completely ignore the will of most of their natural constituency in favor of a handful of wealthy donors and corporate interests. This is in no way a conservative system. It is one that is on the road to something far worse than merely corrupt democracy: a corporate plutocracy the likes of which have been unseen in this country since before WWII (the most egregious example being the reactionary billionaire Koch brothers, the wealthiest men in America taken together, buying up elections, politicians, think tanks, universities, anything they can get their hands

on, in order to achieve complete corporate control over government). Incidentally, as stated earlier, Mussolini would not recognize a meaningful distinction between “corporate plutocracy” and fascism as he understood it.

Four: a conservative party would theoretically continue its protections of individual rights in the case of personal choices that do not come under the purview of the government in any case: personal issues like couples’ reproduction rights, everything involving an individual’s sexual life, and personal drug use. Counter-intuitively for the party of supposed “liberty” is that Republicans overwhelmingly concentrate their rhetorical (if not legislative) energies on the non-issues of abortion, gay marriage, and a [disastrously counter-productive](#) “Drug War”, even while saying at the same time that they do not want the government involved in their lives. It is an improbable twist of logic to say that government should be as small and weak as possible while simultaneously calling for it to mass regulate the most personal and individual choices humans can make in life. For those so-called conservatives opposed to regulating drugs on the basis of its expanding the bureaucracy, the drug war as waged now has the secondary consequence of necessitating a massive police, intelligence, and diplomatic apparatus that rivals counter-terror efforts. This sort of circular logic (we need to fight the drug war to keep bureaucracy small and insurance costs down so we need to spend billions of dollars on a big bureaucracy to fight the drug war) is characteristic of America’s hypocritical, mendacious, small-minded and ill-conceived conservatism.

Five: Republicans never stop insisting that they want “smaller government” (there is an influential power-broker and tireless advocate for tax cuts named Grover Norquist who once [disturbingly said](#) he wanted a government so small that he could “drown it in a bathtub”) while at the same time not realizing that the military is one of the biggest and most

expensive components of the government. True conservatism would advocate a strict imposition of order and stability, especially regarding foreign policy and the threat of war. In reality, most Republicans are [loudly](#), [stupidly](#), and thoughtlessly in favor of war whenever and wherever possible, disregarding that war itself is the biggest and oldest creator of disorder and instability. To pile on the madness, many of these people are what are known as "[chickenhawks](#)": politicians who always want to demonstrate America's martial prowess, despite never having served in the military and not caring at all for troubled veterans or any drawbacks to endless war-making.

The issue at its heart, like most of these, is not conservatism, but of who profits and benefits. The Republican Party, as much as it talks about social non-issues as mentioned above, is, in fact, wholly owned and controlled by corporate interests, one of the most significant of which is the oft-cited but still very real "military-industrial complex." Former [President Bush](#) and [Vice President Cheney](#) (two infamous chickenhawks, by the way) may have helped their [friends, families, and allies](#) to profit greatly from an illegal war (Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Iraq again), but that does not make them conservative. It just makes them corrupt and immoral.

Six: In the same vein, even if war were necessary (as it very rarely may be), a conservative would want to at least protect and reward its own combatants. Republicans, however, have without question or reservation paid untold and unknown amounts of taxpayer money into the hands of [private arms producers and contractors](#), but cannot seem to even take care of its own veterans, many of whom are deeply troubled and impoverished, using every opportunity to deny benefits for one reason or another—blaming servicemembers and veterans for creating their own problems is the usual conservative canard. The Department of Defense is by far the [biggest and most](#)

expensive war machine in the world, and Republican claims of fiscal conservatism are washed away in a flood of rampant waste, fraud, and abuse that envelops the nearly \$1 Trillion-a-year Defense industry. The Department of Veterans Affairs on the other hand, like many government agencies, has been willfully underfunded by Republican budget scribes in order to create a problem where none existed before (the same fiscal strategy taken with the US Postal Service, as well). The result—for veterans or federal workers or any of the other tens of millions of Americans directly dependent on federal jobs, contracts, or support—is disastrous at an individual level of homeless, injured, unemployed, and suicidal veterans and their families.

Seven: America has long built up, concurrently with its middle class, an enviable education system, including world-class universities, that has benefitted society as a whole, both in America and around the world. Conservatives should ideally want to preserve this seemingly wonderful and unpolitical network of classrooms and laboratories for tomorrow's leaders in every field. Republicans, on the other hand, have fully and unabashedly inflamed and empowered the anti-intellectual potential that exists on the margins of every society from ISIS all the way up to Europe and America. In doing so, the Republicans long been at work behind closed doors, slashing funding for public schools and universities, doing their best to gut political opposition to their platform while empowering the type of lazy satisfaction with stupidity and ignorance that one always sees in countries beset by dictators. All the while, they have looked the other way while tuitions skyrocketed due to lack of public funding and student debt skyrocketed due to increased tuition, locking whole generations of young people to lifetimes of debt servitude to private lenders. Moreover, they have made education itself into a political battlefield and actively vilified teachers who protested the short-sighted change of focus and funding for schools. This is in keeping with the modern-day know-

nothingism of the Republican Party, whose politicians decry science, public education, and academic “elites” at every opportunity even while most of them have themselves attended [Harvard](#) or [Yale](#).

There are numerous other examples to be made (private prisons, unions, roads, trains, infrastructure, oil subsidies, renewable energy, gun violence, systemic racism, minimum wage, unequal pay between the sexes, immigration, agricultural subsidies, free trade, health care, the lobbyist/politician revolving door, post offices, national parks, capital punishment), but I think I have made my point clear for the time being. As I said, I am deeply troubled by the series of events that has led to the current iteration of the Republican Party as it is reported on a daily basis in the (corporate, for-profit) mainstream news. The level of [fear-mongering](#), especially after the Paris attacks, and open racism and calls for violence is so rampant to enable the rise of unquestionably [fascist Republican candidate Donald Trump](#). I will restate that I do not by definition support the Democratic Party for its own sake, or hold them to be innocent of all the charges leveled against the Republicans above, but their moderate level of corruption pales in comparison to the cyclopean walls of corruption and reaction built by the recent Republicans.

The Republican Party has not only shown its [inability to properly govern](#) the country during the Bush administration, but it is currently showing its inability in the many states where it controls the levers of government to enact its deeply reactionary policies. It is only an undemocratic system which has allowed this in the first place, but it also goes against the desires and economic interests of a huge majority of citizens themselves, both conservative and otherwise. The danger is that further control by this irresponsible and radical group of power-brokers will entrench and further worsen the situation to the point that we will cease to live

in even an ostensible democracy, but rather, we will wake up one day in something like a dystopian vision of a technologically, culturally, or politically fascist state. The solution, as always: more interest, engagement, and activism by citizens and voters, and not just once every four years but on a daily and local basis. We get the government we allow.