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# DONALD TRUMP'S DANGEROUSLY COHERENT AGENDA

By John Nichols

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## **A Great Threat to American Democracy**

Amidst the surreal and hyper-rapid churning of Donald Trump's America, it can be difficult to grasp what is clownish spectacle and what is deadly serious. Is his latest Tweet a flight of fancy, a cynical distraction, or the near future of American policy? And with a new source of outrage every day, how can one remain clear-eyed about the greatest dangers posed by his administration? Because make no mistake, in spite of the reality-TV-styled performances, the dangers—from gutting health care to war with North Korea—are very real.

This is the subject tackled here by John Nichols, Washington correspondent for *The Nation* and author of several other RLS-NYC studies, including, most recently, "Crashing the Party: Democrats, Republicans, and the Crisis of U.S. Politics" (October 2016). His conclusion, as this study's title indicates, is that President Trump's agenda is disturbingly coherent, and it is based around militarism, austerity, social division, voter suppression, and right-wing authoritarianism. According to Nichols, a president who some have deemed "non-ideological" has instead come to exemplify the rigid ideology of "conservatism without conscience."

In this study, Nichols meticulously outlines the steps taken by the new administration to put its agenda in place. In doing so, he cuts through the fog that has shrouded the political landscape for much of the past year. He digs deep into an examination of the policies and appointments that have had the greatest impact on the American polity since Trump's election. What he finds is a president increasingly beholden to a radical right-wing base with a very clear (and terrifying) vision for America's future.

In his examination, Nichols leaves no doubt that those who would laud Trump as post-partisan, or dismiss him as a clown, are ignoring one of the greatest direct threats to American democracy in generations. For one thing is clear: We need to understand the authoritarian danger ahead of us, and we have to develop a strategy that leads the resistance to victory.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg  
Co-Directors of New York Office, October 2017*

# Donald Trump's Dangerously Coherent Agenda

By John Nichols

In the summer of 2017, six months into Donald Trump's presidency, the Quinnipiac University polling group asked Americans: "What is the first word that comes to mind when you think of Donald Trump?" The most mentioned word was "idiot," followed by "incompetent" and "liar." Words like "unqualified," "clown," and "asshole" were also volunteered on a frequent basis. So, too, were references to Trump's pre-presidential experience as a New York real estate developer and celebrity brand: "rich," "business," "negotiator."

Yet, remarkably, of the 46 words that were mentioned at least five times by the people being polled, there was not a single reference to Trump's ideology, his partisanship, or his policies. The survey revealed the extent to which Trump continues to be treated as an entertainment personality rather than a political leader. In much of the media commentary even now, and in the broader discourse that extends from that commentary, the president is understood as an out-of-control child, a giant "id" with no focus, no program, no agenda.

This is a popular critique among Trump critics. But it is also a false narrative. Though the lingering tendency to portray Trump as a bumbling ignoramus may have developed out of legitimate fear and loathing for this president, the portrayal is an example of political projection rather than realism. It is not the product of a serious examination of the man and his mission. During the early stages of the evolution of this electoral newcomer from reality-TV show host to presidential candidate, it may well have been that Trump was ideologically fluid. Yet, as president,

there is no such fluidity. As the savvy *Los Angeles Times* political commentator Doyle McManus has noted: "Part of his crazy genius is that he's not as unconventional as he pretends."

Trump has embraced a clearly-defined and ideologically-rigid political philosophy that he is advancing along traditional and non-traditional political lines. He has united most of the Republican Party around this program (despite continued grumbling from party elites), he is promoting it with a budget that can and should be seen as a defining document for his administration, and he is working to divide and disempower the opposition so that his unappealing agenda can prevail.

Only by recognizing Trump for what he is—an increasingly ideologically-focused political partisan, with clear positions and practical reasons for advancing them—will it be possible to organize opposition to a juggernaut that begins with one man but is in fact must bigger.

Trump's ideology—we can call it "Trumpism"—is a crude variation on contemporary American conservatism, which is itself a crude variation on what the rest of the world understands as conservatism. The president and his supporters, including the vast majority of Republican members of the US House of Representatives and the US Senate, have embraced the austerity economics favored by traditional corporate conservatives and neoliberal modernizers. But they have not stopped there.

They have combined structural strategies for redistributing wealth upwards with a program

that seeks to undermine cosmopolitanism, civil society, and the basic functioning of democracy. To a far greater extent than any of his predecessors in the post-war era, Trump has abandoned even the pretense of seeking a balance point between the genuine demands for domestic spending and the unlimited demands of a 21st-century variation on Cold War brinksmanship. The president champions the expansion of the military-industrial complex at the expense of domestic social programs that are essential to meeting human needs. At the same time, Trump and his secretary of state, former ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson, are aggressively downsizing the US commitment to diplomacy and international engagement.

There is no spin that can, or should, obscure the Trump agenda. It is rule by the wealthy and powerful in the interest of the wealthy and powerful. Trump may have campaigned as a "billionaire populist," but he has chosen to create a governing agenda that is of the billionaires, for the billionaires, and by the billionaires. The only remaining populism is found in the policy remnants of his racist and xenophobic attacks on immigrants and refugees, a cynical program of attacking the free press as "an enemy of the people," and a far more ambitious program to diminish democracy by

suggesting that voting rights are too freely exercised in a republic where barely half the adult population currently participates in presidential elections.

Notably, the anti-free trade and isolationist policies that were so frequently highlighted during the campaign, and that arguably attracted some swing voters to the Republican ballot line, have been given short shrift in a White House where populist "chief strategist" Stephen Bannon was ousted in August. It has become increasingly clear that the Trump administration's economic policies are dictated from Wall Street suites rather than Main Street union halls. Lori Wallach, the director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, worries about what she describes as "the Trump trade hypocrisy," pointing to an emerging disconnect between the president's rhetoric and the reality of his policies. In her words:

*[Put] your head around this one: Remember, everyone heard him say, 'I'm going to make companies that offshore jobs suffer.' And he threatened (the Carrier manufacturing concern in Indiana): 'Don't you take those jobs out of Indiana and over to Mexico.' Well, Carrier is offshoring 1,200 to 2,000 jobs. So has anything happened to them? Oh, yes. Not a punishment, but 15 new lucrative government contracts since the Trump administration.*

## **The Most Conservative Platform in Modern History**

Much of the Trump agenda was spelled out in the 2016 platform of the Republican Party, which the billionaire seized control of following his disruptive and ultimately definitional run for the GOP nomination. Evangelical Christian political activist and author David Barton announced in the summer of 2016 that the document adopted by Republicans at their convention in Cleveland was "the most conservative

platform in modern history." Trump's Cabinet nominations and selections for key judicial and regulatory posts have, in remarkably concrete terms, confirmed the allegiance of this administration to corporate interests, as well as its social conservatism and its willingness to use the power of government to sow divisions and to diminish democracy. At the same time, the president's budget confirmed the

administration's willingness to sacrifice social programs in order to expand the military-industrial complex.

Though Trump ran as a supposed "outsider," who frequently condemned banking interests, multinational corporations, and Wall Street speculators, he has organized an administration packed with investment bankers and their mandarins. Former Goldman Sachs president and chief operating officer Gary D. Cohn serves as the president's chief economic advisor and directs the National Economic Council, while former Goldman Sachs chief information officer and hedge-fund manager Steven Mnuchin now serves as secretary of the Treasury. Former Wall Street and banking industry lawyer Jay Clayton now serves as chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission that is supposed to regulate... Wall Street and the banking industry. Elsewhere we find billionaires (Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education, Wilbur Ross as Secretary of Commerce), corporate CEOs (Exxon's Tillerson at the Department of State, WWE's Linda McMahon at the Small Business Administration), budget-busting generals who made their names as aggressive warriors (Secretary of Defense James Mattis, National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster and White House Chief of Staff John Kelly), and anti-democratic authoritarians with histories of engaging in wickedly divisive politics designed to inflame racism and xenophobia, including senior advisor for policy Stephen Miller and deputy assistant to the president Sebastian Gorka (who has since been fired).

This is hardly an unheard-of combination: countries around the world have erred on the side of corporatism and militarism rather than human needs and democracy throughout the modern era. The United States has certainly veered into dangerous and unsettling territory in the past—during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, to be sure, but also with Democratic presidents who have been too keen on war and too dismissive of domestic needs. (Powerful arguments have been made that President Lyndon Johnson's mad rush into the Vietnam War fractured the New Deal-style coalition that had led him to a landslide victory in 1964 and that he hoped would forge a "Great Society.")

Yet, while it is always appropriate to place presidencies in context, it is also vital to recognize that the Trump interregnum is distinct. As might be expected from an epic egotist, this president goes further than even his most conservative predecessors when it comes to seeking to satisfy the right-wing base of the Republican Party. He has embraced and expanded upon the most extreme and dangerous tendencies within the contemporary conservative movement in the US—displaying a far greater willingness to exploit racial and social divisions for political purposes than Republicans politicians such as Richard Nixon, with his "southern strategy" and "silent majority" rhetoric in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and Ronald Reagan, with his toleration of the scorching inequality that extended from his "trickle-down" economics and deregulation schemes.

## **"The Southern Strategy on Steroids"**

The online news-site *Salon* got things right when it headlined a piece by Conor Lynch: "Donald Trump is the Southern Strategy on

Steroids: Why his candidacy is the realization of decades of GOP hate-mongering." Trump's assault on diversity and democracy is far more

threatening than any agenda advanced by Nixon or Reagan. The 37th and 40th presidents were political careerists with long experience in electioneering and governing, and relatively traditional views regarding the boundaries that politicians ought not traverse (even if each of them ultimately crossed ethical and legal lines in ways that cast broad shadows over their administrations).

What makes Trump so dangerous is also what makes him so powerful—even as scandals swirl around him, even as he often seems to be drowning in a morass of his own creation. Trump may not have started as a popular figure with establishment Republicans, but he has made himself the face of their shared party's future. He has done this by reconnecting the primary wings of the modern conservative movement that have since the 1970s guided the party in often uncomfortable collaboration. Onboard the Trump train are both the exceptionally cynical economic players, who see government as a vehicle to enrich themselves and their associates, and the theological zealots, whose essential political tenet is the pursuit of the power to impose their will on others. So, too, are the militarists who, though they were initially skeptical about Trump (and while some remain concerned by the president's erratic behavior and pronouncements), have grown increasingly enthusiastic as the president continues to appoint hawkish generals to key positions and propose massive budget increases for the Pentagon.

Economic conservatives and military contractors wield immense power at the higher levels of the Republican Party. Meanwhile, social conservatives are influential as a voting bloc. And Trump has catered to that bloc's authoritarian tendencies by stirring a toxic mix of "know-nothing" disdain for journalism and science, anti-immigrant sentiment, tolerance for "neo-Confederate" racism, a renewal of drug-war rhetoric, a rejection of criminal justice re-

form, disregard for the rights of women and members of the LGBTQ community, transparent voter suppression strategies, and a crack-down on dissent that is grounded in old-school "red scare" language and tactics.

Historically, there were many in the corporate wing of the Republican Party who rejected—or, at the least, sought to temper—the cruel and unusual agenda of social conservatism. House Speaker Paul Ryan gave voice to the old politics when he excused another of Trump's ethical meltdowns with the line: "He's just new to this." Unlike conservative political careerists who have learned how to cloak objectionable proposals in soothing language—like calling a plan that would leave 24 million Americans without access to health care "the American Health Care Act"—Ryan said Trump simply "wasn't steeped in the long-running protocols."

In other words, Trump's words and deeds are not the problem in the view of his more experienced enablers; it's merely a matter of presentation.

Republican insiders have been griping about Trump's rough edges and big elbows since he announced his presidential run in June 2015. But, over time, they have come to accept that he is not merely one of them—he is their leader. "In many ways, Donald Trump is the conservative movement right now," Republican pollster Jim McLaughlin told the online magazine *Politico* a month after the president took office. "And the conservative movement is Donald Trump."

Conservatives who once identified as "Never Trump" Republicans now defend the man and his agenda. Just ask Utah Senator Mike Lee, a Republican who grumbled about Trump throughout the 2016 campaign. "At any given time, when there is a Republican president, typically we regard that person as the leader of the Republican Party," Lee said in July of 2017. "I would say that is the case today."

## The Republican March to the Right

Why the coalescence? There is an element of crass partisanship and political cynicism in play. But it is not a new partisanship or cynicism. Since the 1960s, Republicans have moved rapidly to the right, taking ever more extreme positions on economic and social issues. Moderates have been defeated in primaries and elbowed to the sidelines of the party or, in many cases, out of it altogether. What's left is a party that hugs the ideological fringe; since 1992, only one Republican presidential contender has won more than 50 percent of the vote and that contender, George W. Bush, could only muster 50.7 percent in 2004. Four years later, Republican support fell five points, to 45.7 percent of the vote, with Democrat Barack Obama sweeping to the presidency and political pundits beginning to talk about a permanent realignment of American politics toward the center-left.

In fact, Obama's success began to bring together the two wings of the Republican Party, making them more disciplined in the process. Congressional Republicans engaged in "party of no" obstruction from the day the nation's first African-American president was sworn in. At the same time, Republican governors and legislators began to implement voter-suppression strategies that benefitted the party's candidates—developing rigid voter identification requirements, limits on early voting, and other approaches that made it easier to cast ballots, and "gerrymandering" congressional and legislative district lines to reduce competition for Republican incumbents. The results were striking: in 2012, for instance, Democrats secured 1.4 million more votes than Republicans in races for US House seats. But Republicans finished with 234 seats to 201 for the Democrats.

As a conservative US Supreme Court issued a series of rulings that allowed dramatically more spending on elections (expanding the influence of conservative billionaires, who became prime

campaign donors) and gutted the Voting Rights Act (reducing protections for minority voters who tend to back Democrats), the interests that relied on the Republican Party to advance their economic and social agendas became increasingly obsessed with gaming the system in favor of the GOP. Thus, even if they did not see eye to eye on every issue, they were able to agree on a win-at-any-cost agenda. As *The New York Times* editorial board explained in the spring of 2016:

*It's become an accepted truth of modern politics that Republican electoral prospects go up as the number of voters goes down. Conservatives have known this for a long time, which helps explain their intensifying efforts to make it harder to vote, or to eliminate large numbers of people from political representation entirely.*

Conservatism remade itself before Donald Trump arrived on the political scene. But that change made the Grand Old Party of Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and Dwight Eisenhower uniquely vulnerable to the appeal of a disruptive political figure like Trump—who embraced and repeated what the Brennan Center for Justice identified as "baseless" conspiracy theories about stolen elections and "illegal voting," and who suggested a willingness to use the power of government to guard Republican advantages in the states and nationally.

Trump united Republicans around a common purpose: using the machinery of modern elections (combining crude right-wing populist messaging and aggressive structural interventions) to achieve and maintain the political power that is needed to turn the state itself into a political machine. That political machine, operating like the old big-city machines of the first half of the 20th century, then rewards friends and punishes enemies. Typically, the greatest rewards go to economic elites. But there are also targeted rewards for key voting blocs, which are nurtured to maintain power—especially social conserva-

tives, who were thrilled with the president's appointment of a reactionary jurist with a lifelong history of involvement in right-wing causes and campaigns, Neil Gorsuch, to the US Supreme Court.

Of course, there are also punishments for those who are not on board with the machine's political project—constant attacks on individual journalists and on the free press in general; stereotyping of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, and the development of policies based on those stereotypes; deep cuts to essential domestic programs and abandonment of initiatives launched to address everything from poverty to climate change. The president even fired the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation when the lawman got in his way.

Elite Republicans might still wince at the president's blunt language, conflicts of interests, obstructions of justice, and open disregard for ethical constraints, but they remain generally enthusiastic about Trump's willingness to game the system on their behalf—especially when he created an Orwellian "Presidential Commission on Election Integrity" led by his hyper-partisan vice president, Mike Pence, and Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, an anti-immigrant zealot and advocate for rigid "Voter ID" laws who has been described by the American Civil Liberties Union as "the king of voter suppression." Within weeks, Kobach launched a series of initiatives that *The Nation* in the summer of 2017 referred to as "an unprecedented attack on voting rights." As the

magazine explained: "We are witnessing the beginning of a nationwide voter-suppression campaign, led by the White House and enabled by Congress and the Department of Justice." *Rolling Stone* magazine observed: "The US has an ugly history of racially discriminatory voting laws. Trump and Kobach have made it impossible for anyone who cares about empirical evidence to deny this is the latest chapter."

Seen in its totality, the Trump agenda is chilling. It is also far more ideologically coherent and politically focused than his critics—and many of his allies—choose to admit. This study examines why that is so, and offers an assessment of the most daunting aspects of his program: including a rigorous reordering of budget priorities to favor militarism, corporatism, austerity, and what former House Speaker Newt Gingrich once referred to as "right-wing social engineering." Trump's is an authoritarian agenda rooted in what now passes for mainstream conservatism, yet it expands on that by scheming to reorder political priorities to diminish and disempower electoral opposition to its budget priorities.

Trump's irrational and erratic pronouncements are frightening. But what should be even more frightening are his moments of clarity. And when it comes to this presidential program, there is a good measure of clarity. Trump and his allies have a vision for where they want to take America. And they are pursuing it, far more aggressively and with far more success, than has been acknowledged to this point.

## **"Conservatism Without Conscience": Why Trump's Agenda Remains Largely Unexamined**

American media tends to focus obsessively on the personalities of politicians rather than the issues and ideologies they champion. This is not a

new phenomenon. As the presidency has grown increasingly "imperial"—to borrow a phrase from historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr.—and as

the Congress has surrendered its constitutionally-defined role as a check and balance on presidential excess, broadcast and cable television have increasingly focused on the men who have held the presidency rather than the governing process. Presidents have come to be treated as “brands” rather than leaders, and ideas and policies are treated as expressions of those brands—as opposed to being weighed on their own merits.

In such a circumstance, it is not surprising that Donald Trump—a product of the modern entertainment age who has mastered old media platforms such as broadcast television and new media platforms such as Twitter—was able to roll over his opposition in the 2016 Republican primaries and the general election that followed.

The politics of personality made it possible for Trump to manipulate the media and grab for power. But they do not provide a full, or even satisfactory, explanation for why Trump secured the Republican nomination and the presidency; there were always ideological undercurrents that defined his candidacy. He began campaigning on anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim themes, which had become so popular on the right wing of the Republican Party that mainstream conservative leaders abandoned efforts to achieve even moderate immigration policy reforms or to embrace proposals for a humane response to the refugee crisis created by war in Syria.

Trump then moved—out of sheer opportunism, as he had never been a party regular or a movement conservative—to meet the litmus tests of the right. The former donor to Democratic candidates and liberal causes, who was attacked during the primary campaign by Texas Senator Ted Cruz for his “New York values,” suddenly opposed abortion rights and condemned Planned Parenthood, defended aggressive policing and attacked the Black Lives Matter movement, called for elimination of the federal minimum wage law and expressed sympathy for anti-la-

bor “right-to-work” legislation, denied climate science, and, most importantly for social conservatives, promised to select a Supreme Court justice from a list of candidates screened by social conservatives and corporate special interests.

Trump’s cynicism inspired more cynicism about his candidacy from right-wing talk radio hosts and professional purists, who imagined that the thrice-married playboy from Manhattan was a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” liberal trying to take over a party that saw its base as rural, southern, and western. But the “Never Trump” conservatives failed to understand what really motivated Trump. They even fantasized that he might drop out when the race got difficult—just as some fantasize now, as the presidency gets difficult, that he might abandon the Oval Office and head home to Trump Tower. The reality is that Trump is not a quitter, he’s a survivor. And he has always survived by remaking himself to be what the moment, or the real-estate deal, or the network contract, demanded.

As a presidential candidate, and now as a president, survival requires a base of absolutely loyal supporters who refuse to abandon their man even when his hypocrisy is exposed, his immorality revealed, and his corruption confirmed. Trump was never going to find that kind of support in the middle of the political spectrum as a post-partisan “problem-solver.” The only unthinking and unbending loyalty that has been steadily available to him has been on the right—during the 2016 campaign and now as president. So Trump has veered right, and he is not coming back. There’s no respect for him in the middle, and there is open disdain for him on the left. As such, Trump has become a right-winger of the highest order, a cynical but also serious convert who embraces the agenda far more aggressively and completely than did more genuinely conservative Republican presidents.

While others may have believed in the ideas as necessary responses to economic and social

challenges, he believes in the movement itself as a necessary response to his own political challenges. He needs it, and he needs it to be strong. It is for this reason (as well as his own predilections) that Trump has aligned himself with anti-democratic and authoritarian forces on the right that seek to defend their position of power by attacking the credibility of journalists who might expose them and the voting rights of citizens who might reject them.

Trump ran for the presidency on what conservative ideologues and media analysts recognized as “the most conservative major party platform in American history.” He chose as his running-mate an arch-social conservative. And he benefitted from the willingness of key Republican Party leaders, led by RNC chairman Reince Priebus (Trump’s first pick for chief of staff), to merge their electoral ambitions with his own.

Those ideological undercurrents became far more evident in the transition process that followed his election. And they form the essential, if still largely unexamined, reality of Trump’s presidency. While it is easy to get lost in the steady stream of tweets, outrageous statements, and violations of constitutional restrictions on presidential profiteering, this focus on Trump’s personal foibles obscures the actual agenda of the most powerful man on the planet. Trump often benefits from the lingering fantasy that he is a relatively nonpartisan and non-ideological “id” who simply enjoys the trappings of office. But this is foolish, and arguably dangerous, delusion.

Trump is now clearly identified with a right-wing agenda, which he sustains and advances with

the same determination that he pursued “art of the deal” projects as a New York real estate developer. To fail to recognize this new reality is to fail to recognize the ways in which Trump has evolved from a businessman, who saw politicians as commodities to be bought and sold (with campaign contributions and lobbying largesse), to an actual politician who recognizes the necessity of political allies and the partisan apparatus that sustains electioneering and governing in the two-party system of the United States.

It is hard for many observers to acknowledge that Trump has evolved—or even that he has the capacity for evolution. The president is still in many ways the same narcissistic and bombastic “performer” that he always was (as a businessman and a “reality TV” star of shows such as “The Apprentice”), but the focus of his narcissism and bombast has shifted to a political project that has its own set of rules and requirements. Trump may bristle at those constraints but he accepts them as a necessity, in the same way that he accepted the requirements of the real estate and entertainment industries when he was engaged in them. As in his past incarnations, Trump has remade himself as an exemplar of the political endeavor in which he is now engaged. Those who have been paying attention recognize this.

Conservative commentator Dennis Prager explained—in an April 2017 column titled “It’s Time for Conservatives to Celebrate This President”—that: “[Trump] has not only surpassed many of our expectations, he has thus far governed in a manner more consistent with conservative principles than any president since Ronald Reagan, and arguably since Calvin Coolidge.” Prager is right.

## **Trump’s Authoritarianism**

The billionaire who began his 2016 presidential run as a threat to the Republican Party estab-

lishment has become a stalwart and increasingly essential partisan (backing Republican

candidates in critical special elections and defending Republican congressional leaders when they reject compromise and cooperation with Democrats). The candidate who once ranged across the ideological spectrum—so wildly that the prospect of his nomination was openly “dreaded” by conservatives such as Prager—has settled into a conservative orthodoxy that exploits the power of the presidency (appointments, executive orders, and the bully pulpits of a new communications age) to promote a toxic mix of corporate supremacy, economic nationalism, militarism, religious right authoritarianism, and racial and social division. Trump now embraces what commentator Jeet Heer refers to as “conservative cruelty.”

This president has an authoritarian streak that leads many observers to suggest that under his leadership the United States could veer toward fascism. But the thing to understand about Trump’s authoritarianism is that it is not merely rooted in his own damaged egotism; it is equally an extension of the crude celebration of self-interest and self-service that has infected the mainstream of contemporary conservatism in the United States. A decade ago, John Dean, a Republican from his youth who revered conservative icon Barry Goldwater and served in the Nixon White House, wrote the book *Conservatives Without Conscience*. In it, Dean argued that the contemporary conservative movement has embraced authoritarianism, describing

*the political behavior of conservatives, from their unbridled viciousness toward those daring to disagree with them to their religion-based piety politics which conceal an indifference to the founding principles of liberty and equality, as well as fundamental precepts like the separation of government powers.*

Dean warned in his book and in interviews that, as the conservative movement and the Republican Party became increasingly aligned with authoritarian thinking and “proto-fascist behavior,” the United States could be threatened by “conservatives without conscience who are ca-

pable of plunging this nation into disasters the likes of which we have never known.” He did not know it at the time, but the former Nixon aide was anticipating Trump’s relationship with the conservative “base” that is essential to his political progress.

Dean wrote of social-science research that suggested there was “a very typical pattern in the demographics in the United States of the hardcore authoritarian followers, that their leaders can do [...] no wrong. They won’t question them. They will hang with them forever. They’re like lemmings.” This is a calculus that Trump recognizes and exploits. But from that exploitation has evolved a connection that now defines Trump: he relies so thoroughly on conservatives without conscience that he must himself be an absolutely consistent conservative without conscience.

As such, Trump has made himself more conservative than conservatives knew a president could be. “During the primaries and the presidential campaign, Donald Trump rarely described himself as a conservative,” explained an approving *Investor’s Business Daily* editorial. “But his appointments and his initial actions as president have turned out to be as about as right wing as it gets.”

This truth is still not fully understood in the United States, and it is perhaps even less understood internationally, because media outlets continue to deal with Trump as an abstraction rather than a reality. Even now, well into Trump’s presidency, the same commentators who in 2015 and 2016 got everything about his political trajectory wrong imagine that he will surprise the country and the world with a lurch to the left—or at least to the center. This theory that Trump is an ideological conman with few ideas and fewer principles—a political grifter always on the watch for opportunities to abandon the Republican Party he aligned with only a few years ago—remains so popular with “Never Trump” elements of the

conservative and liberal intelligentsia that both often miss the facts of this presidency as they have solidified over time.

A handful of elite conservative commentators who are ill at ease with Trump's brash and irresponsible style continue to claim that he is not one of their own. *The National Review*, which during the Reagan and Bush eras positioned itself as the magazine of mainstream conservatives, has long argued that Trump is not welcome within the ranks of a movement the editors seek to define along lines sketched by their magazine's founding editor and publisher, William F. Buckley. "Donald Trump's Republican Party is Not Conservative," read a National Review headline during the campaign, while a post-election headline declared: "Donald Trump: Pragmatist Not Conservative." But Donald Trump's transition from candidate to president saw an ambitious embrace of right-wing ideologues as contenders for top posts in government, and his actual presidency has been a rigorous exercise in contemporary conservatism along lines that have proven to be increasingly appealing to both social-conservatives stalwarts and Wall Street donors.

Donald Trump has an agenda: it is right-wing, pro-corporate, illiberal, and often inhumane. It literally seeks to redistribute wealth upward, from the very voters who placed their trust in Trump as the "anti-establishment" candidate of 2016 toward the wealthy elites whom he at-

tacked during the campaign but now serves. It makes the expansion of the military, and of the national security apparatus, a priority over human needs. It rejects science and embraces religious-right dogmas that even Ronald Reagan and the Bushes saw as too extreme.

It may not have been Trump's plan to veer so far to the right when he began plotting his campaign. But he saw that it was on the right where the deal would be struck, and so he went there. The notion that this reality will shift at some critical stage of the Trump presidency has been disproven again and again. He has appointed what CNN describes as a "conservative dream team of domestic Cabinet appointments that promises to move swiftly to dismantle the Obama administration's legacy in health care, education, labor, and environmental policies." His is not just the most conservative Cabinet since that of Ronald Reagan, noted Reagan Cabinet member Bill Bennett in a Fox News appearance: "They're the most conservative including Reagan."

Of course, the true measure of a president's agenda is not made with a review of his appointments, or even of his rhetoric. The true measure comes in the specific set of priorities outlined in the budget plan of the new administration. And it is here that Donald Trump confirmed his embrace of the combination of militarism, austerity, division, and authoritarianism that defines the agenda of conservatism without conscience.

## **A War Budget Built on a Framework of Immoral Expediency**

Budgets, Christian thinker and activist Jim Wallis reminds us, are moral documents. "Any budget is a moral statement of priorities, whether it's a budget created by an individual, a family, a school, a city, or a nation," Wallis argues. "It tells us, what areas, issues, things, or people

are most important to the creators of that budget, and which are least important."

Wallis has been around Washington for decades, leading a circle of religious scholars and activists that has challenged presidents of

both political parties to develop budgets that address the needs of the poor. He has had plenty to object to over the years. But Wallis has always retained a sense of balance and fairness. He does not go in for hyperbole; when he is blunt it is because bluntness is called for. And what he says about the budget plan of the Trump administration—the truest outline of priorities so far provided by this president—is unsparing in its bluntness. Decrying the budget as “a heartless knife-slash to those who are struggling just to feed themselves and their families,” the writer explained. “[The] choice to protect the rich instead of the poor in the name of deficit reduction is an immoral one,” explained the religious leader who has counseled Democratic and Republican presidents but who gave Trump no quarter. “Demonizing the poor and slashing programs that benefit low-income people—while refusing to scrutinize the much larger subsidies we provide to the wealthy—is hypocritical and cruel.”

Immoral. Hypocritical. Cruel. Yes, Donald Trump's budget plan is all of these things.

But it is also something else. Trump's budget is a pure expression of the fiscal fantasy that has been advanced by advocates of austerity in the United States and around the world for decades. When the president delivered his first Joint Address to the Congress of the United States, he suggested that the United States could cut taxes for wealthy Americans and corporations, rip tens of billions of dollars out of domestic programs (and away from diplomacy and climate-change initiatives), hand that money over to the military-industrial complex, and somehow remain a functional and genuinely strong nation. This was a restatement of the budgetary math that George Herbert Walker Bush decried almost four decades ago as “voodoo economics.”

There was no fiscal strategy that could reap a future of peace and prosperity from the seeds

Trump is planting. Trump was not so much proposing a budget in the conventional sense; rather, this was a political agenda framed in fiscal calculations that were never meant to add up. The purpose was to appeal to a right-wing base that has been told for decades that Ronald Reagan's sole failure was that he was not conservative enough. This facts-be-damned approach to budgeting has become increasingly popular on the right, where “conservatives without conscience” refuse to be troubled by the details because, John Dean argues, they do not want to let facts or figures get in the way of their mission. These political charlatans despise expertise and the practicalities that extend from that expertise; as Dean explains, they “evidence little concern for anyone and anything other than themselves, their tribe, and their goal of imposing their worldview on others.”

In other words, while Trump's budget was economically incoherent, it was ideologically precise in its restatement of contemporary conservative dogma. And at the heart of that dogma was an unquestioning faith in the military-industrial complex. “I am sending the Congress a budget that rebuilds the military, eliminates the Defense sequester, and calls for one of the largest increases in national defense spending in American history,” the president gleefully announced toward the conclusion of his address to the joint session of Congress.

The president brought little precision to the task of explaining how he would pay for that increase—aside from mentioning that he had “placed a hiring freeze on non-military and non-essential Federal workers.” He let John Michael “Mick” Mulvaney, a wealthy political careerist from South Carolina, do the heavy lifting.

Mulvaney was elected to the state House in 2006, the state Senate in 2008, the US House in 2010, and more recently tapped to join Trump's Cabinet as Director of the Office of Management and Budget. Hailed by Rush Limbaugh

as a “Rush baby”—a true believer in the militarism, corporatism and social rigidity the right-wing talk radio host has been promulgating for more than a quarter century—Mulvaney is an unblinking, and often unthinking, advocate for domestic austerity budgets even in times of plenty. He made a name for himself as a debt-and-deficits-obsessed congressman who was always on the hunt for an excuse to shut down the federal government. *The New York Times* once noted that Mulvaney took such a hard line against raising the nation’s debt limit that he and his allies embraced the term “Shutdown Caucus” because of their willingness to shut the government down instead of passing the routine resolutions that had been approved by past congresses with nary a notice.

When Trump tapped Mulvaney, there were still a few overly-romantic pundits who imagined that the new president might keep some of his big-spending campaign promises. Headlines announced that: “Trump promised to save entitlements. His budget director pick wants him to break his vow.” In fact, Trump’s selection of Mulvaney was a triumph for the Steve Bannon wing of the White House, with its determination to pursue both the “deconstruction of the administrative state” and the construction of unprecedented military power for the real and imagined wars to come. Trump in the White House became what Trump as a candidate had rarely been: a deficit-decrying fiscal “hawk” who fretted that “we are nearly \$20 trillion in debt” while pointing to Mulvaney as “a very high-energy leader with deep convictions for how to responsibly manage our nation’s finances and save our country from drowning in red ink.” That’s what they all say before imposing austerity on the great mass of citizens while at the same time finding more than enough federal funding to permit massive tax breaks for the wealthy and massive new spending on the military.

Trump promised that his administration would make “smart choices” with Mulvaney helming

the OMB. But that was just spin. Trump and the people around them knew that Mulvaney, the career-ladder-climbing candidate from South Carolina, would make political choices.

This is the key to understanding Trump’s agenda. It is always political and ideological.

That truth of Trumpism was hinted at in the president’s agenda-setting speech to Congress and confirmed a few weeks later, when Mulvaney released a budget blueprint proposal that asked Congress for a \$54 billion increase in Pentagon spending—a ten percent hike over the previous fiscal year’s budget—and a six percent increase for the Mexican-border-wall-building Department of Homeland Security. At the same time, the budget projected no increase in the deficit, making it appealing to at least some of Mulvaney’s old friends from the House Freedom Caucus. How could this fiscal feat be achieved? By effectively gutting everything else, argued the president and his budget director in a steady defense of the indefensible.

CNN ran a list of the hardest-hit agencies:

- ⇒ Health and Human Services, the department responsible for implementing Obamacare and its proposed repeal, would face a \$12.6 billion cut—or a 16.2 percent decrease;
- ⇒ Environmental Protection Agency: a \$2.6 billion cut—or a 31.4 percent decrease;
- ⇒ State Department: an \$11 billion cut—or a 28.7 percent decrease;
- ⇒ Labor Department: a \$2.5 billion cut—or a 20.7 percent decrease;
- ⇒ Agriculture Department: a \$5 billion cut—or a 20.7 percent decrease;
- ⇒ US Army Corps of Engineers: a \$1 billion cut—or a 16.3 percent decrease;
- ⇒ National Institutes of Health: a \$5.8 billion cut—or a nearly 20 percent cut decrease.

The budget plan also included proposals to reduce spending at the Department of Commerce by 15.7 percent; the Department of Education by 13.5 percent; the Department of Housing and Urban Development by 13.2 percent; the Department of Transportation by 12.7 percent; and the Department of the Interior by 11.7 percent.

Targeted for elimination were Community Service Block Grants that fund programs such as Meals on Wheels, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Global Climate Change Initiative, the Legal Services Corporation, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and dozens of Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Education programs and initiatives. Funding for Amtrak was cut.

Funding for the Clean Power Plan was slashed, as were payments to the United Nations' climate change initiative. "I think the president was fairly straightforward—we're not spending money on that anymore; we consider that to be

a waste of your money to go out and do that," announced Mulvaney when asked about programs to address climate change.

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders reviewed the proposal and pronounced it to be "morally obscene and bad economic policy." Sanders ticked off his trepidations regarding the budget:

*It will cause devastating pain to the very people Trump promised to help during the campaign. At a time of massive income and wealth inequality, when 43 million Americans are living in poverty and half of older Americans have no retirement savings, we should not slash programs that senior citizens, children and working people rely on in order to provide a massive increase in spending to the military industrial complex. Trump's priorities are exactly the opposite of where we should be heading as a nation.*

That is an accurate statement regarding Trump's austerity budget. Yet it is broad in its assessment. Let's go deep and get specific about how the Trump administration's domestic austerity agenda is at once heartless and dangerous.

## **Where The Knife Plunges: Getting Specific About Trump's Budget Cuts**

In defending the budget plan, Mulvaney explained, with a straight face, that cuts to Meals on Wheels and Head Start programs weren't hard-hearted at all. "I think it's probably one of the most compassionate things we can do," said Mulvaney, who argued that it was "fairly compassionate" to refuse to fund programs "unless we can guarantee to you that that money is actually being used in a proper function."

"Meals on Wheels sounds great," Mulvaney told the White House press corps. But, he said, "we're not going to spend (money) on programs that cannot show that they actually deliver the promises that we've made to people."

Actually, what Meals on Wheels does is deliver on promises—in the form of hot meals and a friendly check-in for millions of elderly Americans in small towns and big cities across the United States. As explained by Ellie Hollander, President and CEO of Meals on Wheels America:

*(Cuts) of any kind to these highly successful and leveraged programs would be a devastating blow to our ability to provide much-needed care for millions of vulnerable seniors in America, which in turn saves billions of dollars in reduced healthcare expenses.*

In fact, virtually all of the cuts proposed by Trump and Mulvaney tear the social fabric of

America. "It's said that a budget is a statement of values," said a stunned Oregon Senator Jeff Merkley. "If so, this budget makes it perfectly clear that the Trump administration values special interests and defense contractors over American middle-class families."

Merkley described the budget as "an attack on our families' most essential needs, from the clean air and water we breathe and drink, to the schools our kids attend, to the very investments that create American jobs."

Describing the budget blueprint as "morally bankrupt," California Rep. Barbara Lee said

*this budget would offer massive handouts to defense contractors while gutting lifesaving programs for the poor and middle class. Despite the rampant waste, fraud and abuse at the Pentagon, this budget funnels even more taxpayer money into the pockets of defense contractors. Rather than make us safer, this budget outline is a recipe for greater instability, hunger and hopelessness around the world. By cutting the Department of State and USAID by more than \$10 billion, the Trump administration is undermining our global leadership and sentencing families around the world to poverty and illness.*

Lee has fought these battles before, seeking to avert wars and the circumstances that lead to wars. But she has never faced challenges so daunting as those presented by the Trump budget plan—and the Trump presidency.

Trump's program of austerity for working families and munificence for military contractors (the president's speech to the Joint Session of Congress actually talked up Lockheed and "the fantastic new F-35 jet fighter") is not exactly new. It has been a mainstream conservative mantra since the Grand Old Party purged itself of the "Modern Republicans" who clung to the vision of former President Dwight Eisenhower, and they have since made theirs a party of reaction rather than reason. But even Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush eschewed the budgetary extremism that Trump, via Mul-

vaney, embraced with an immediacy and a fervor that arrested any hope that a "billionaire populist" president might steer his adopted party back from the brink.

The "Budget Blueprint" that Trump took to Congress in February and March is not the final statement on fiscal priorities. It is, as they acknowledge, a blueprint. Final budgets are never built to spec.

But the values are spelled out, the agenda is clear. Trump's Office of Management and Budget does not intend to plot a course to "make America great again." It is tipping the balance against greatness by making what the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, referred to as "the last best hope of earth" into an ever more heavily militarized state that will not care for its own.

This is not an accidental turn. This is by design. It is not a grand design, however. Rather, it is an approach that Trump has adopted as he has moved from the capricious politics of his initial candidacy to the reality of an ever more rigidly right-wing presidency.

Mulvaney said on the eve of the president's "Budget Blueprint" speech, "The president is doing what he said he'd do when he ran. What you see in this budget," the budget director claimed, "is exactly what the president ran on. He ran on increasing spending on the military..."

Not exactly. It is true that Trump has always had a problem with focus and consistency. He certainly said a lot of things when he was bidding for the presidency in 2016. But there some basic themes: He made big promises about investing in jobs and infrastructure, delivering more and better health care, and protecting Social Security and Medicare. He also portrayed himself as a critic of the war in Iraq, a skeptic about new military adventures, and a critic of "the fraud and abuse and everything else" in bloated Department of Defense bud-

gets. "I'm gonna build a military that's gonna be much stronger than it is right now," he announced on NBC's Meet the Press in 2015. "It's gonna be so strong, nobody's gonna mess with us," he promised. "But you know what? We can do it for a lot less."

That seemed reasonably definitive. So it must have surprised at least a few Trump backers to learn from Mulvaney, in February 2017, that raising the Pentagon budget was such a high priority for the man who barely a year earlier was talking about doing defense "for a lot less." And it must have come as an even bigger surprise to learn that the domestic agenda that seemed so robust during the campaign would be sacrificed to pad the bottom lines of defense contractors.

The values of the Trump presidency, as opposed to the values of the Trump campaign, were suddenly and fully on display. Mulvaney was unsettlingly vague when asked about keeping Trump's promise to guard against So-

cial Security cuts. But he was absolutely clear about the enthusiasm of the new administration for the old military-industrial complex.

As Mulvaney explained,

*[We] took \$54 billion out of non-defense discretionary spending in order to increase defense spending—entirely consistent with what the president said that he would do. So what's the president done? He's protected the nation, but not added any additional money to the 2018 deficit. This is a winning argument for my friends in the House and a winning argument for a lot of folks all over the country. The president does what he says but doesn't add to the budget [deficit]. That's a win.*

Mulvaney is wrong. That's not a win. This does not protect America—at least not in the sense that Democratic and Republican presidents have historically understood the preservation of the republic. Budgeting is always a matter of striking balances. And it has long been understood that, when there is an imbalance, the American experiment is threatened.

## **Eisenhower: "We Welcome Every Honest Act of Peace"**

Dwight Eisenhower explained this when he appeared barely two months into his presidency before the American Society of Newspaper Editors. The speech was much anticipated. Eisenhower was the first Republican commander in chief in two decades, and he was still in the process of making his imprint on the Oval Office, the country, and a world that was in the grips of a "Cold War." The new president could have chosen any topic for his first major address to the assembled media luminaries. He chose as his topic the proper balancing of budget priorities.

Eisenhower recognized the threats that existed. He spoke, at length, about difficult relations between the United States and the Soviet Union,

and he addressed the threat of annihilation posed by the spread of atomic weaponry. But the career military man—the supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces in Europe during World War II, the chief of staff of the Army during the postwar era when tensions with Moscow rose—did not come to suggest that increased defense spending was a singular priority. In fact, his purpose was the opposite. He spoke of the "dread road" of constant military escalation and warned about "a burden of arms draining the wealth and the labor of all peoples; a wasting of strength that defies the American system or the Soviet system or any system to achieve true abundance and happiness for the peoples of this earth."

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed," said Eisenhower, who explained that:

*This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some 50 miles of concrete highway. We pay for a single fighter with a half million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people. This, I repeat, is the best way of life to be found on the road the world has been taking. This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.*

Eisenhower did not propose surrender or immediate or casual disarmament. But he did propose diplomacy ("We welcome every honest act of peace") and the sincere pursuit of a world with fewer weapons and fewer excuses for war making ("This we do know: a world that begins to witness the rebirth of trust among nations can find its way to a peace that is neither partial nor punitive").

"The fruit of success in all these tasks would present the world with the greatest task, and the greatest opportunity, of all," explained Eisenhower. "It is this: the dedication of the energies, the resources, and the imaginations of all peaceful nations to a new kind of war. This would be a declared total war, not upon any human enemy but upon the brute forces of poverty and need."

"The monuments to this new kind of war would be these: roads and schools, hospitals and homes, food and health," the new president concluded. "We are ready, in short, to dedicate our strength to serving the needs, rather than the fears, of the world."

These are different times. The world has changed, and so has the United States. But what has changed the most is the understanding that providing for the common defense does not preclude the promotion of the general welfare.

American conservatives like to say that "there is no free lunch," and that is certainly true when it comes to budgeting. It is not possible to move tens of billions of dollars out of domestic programs that have already in many cases been squeezed to austerity levels and into a military budget so vast that, the National Priorities Project reports, "US military expenditures are roughly the size of the next seven largest military budgets around the world, combined."

On a planet where Americans account for 4.34 percent of the population, US military spending accounts for 37 percent of the global total, according to the National Priorities Project. And Trump—with Mulvaney's encouragement and assistance—has made it his purpose to increase that percentage as much as he can.

That is a problematic imbalance in itself. But what makes it even more problematic is Mulvaney's signal that, under Trump, the imbalance will be maintained not by collecting new revenues but by redistributing the money that could have been spent on health care, housing, and education at home—and abroad on the international diplomacy and foreign aid that might actually reduce the need for military expenditures. "While Trump claims he's serious about great negotiation, his plan to pilage funds from the State Department and foreign aid to feed the insatiable Pentagon budget says otherwise," notes Peace Action Executive Director Jon Rainwater. Instead of putting Americans first, Rainwater says, Trump "plans to line the arms industry's pockets by cutting programs like health care that provide real security to American families says otherwise."

This is the realization of the worst fears that Eisenhower addressed, not just in his 1953 “Cross of Iron” speech, but also in the final address of his presidency, in which he warned that “we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex.” He continued:

*We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals so that security and liberty may prosper together.*

## Perpetuating an Unpopular Politics by Diminishing Democracy

When Eisenhower warned against letting the weight of the military-industrial complex crush liberties or democratic processes, he did not speak as a casual observer of the issues at hand. As military governor of the US Occupation Zone in Germany following World War II, where he was present for the writing of a post-war constitution that sought to guard against militarism and totalitarianism, and as the president during the era of McCarthyism, when he saw the extent to which a supposedly free nation could surrender itself to authoritarian and “red-scare” hysteria, Eisenhower recognized that the essential underpinnings of democracy were vulnerable. And he knew that the vulnerability was greatest when cynical political figures used the power of government to consolidate power by stirring fear, encouraging division, and constraining the rights of the many in order to reward the few.

Eisenhower fought a pitched battle against the right-wing elements within the Republican Party of his day, arguing as president that:

*Should any political party attempt to abolish social security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history. There is a tiny splinter group, of course, that believes you can do these things. Among them are H. L. Hunt (you possibly know his background), a few other Texas oil millionaires, and an occasional politician or business*

*man from other areas. Their number is negligible and they are stupid.*

Eisenhower, who went out of his way to seek the votes of African Americans and labor union members in his 1956 reelection campaign, wanted a broad Republican Party that would compete on the basis of ideas and accomplishments rather than the scaremongering and the voter suppression strategies that southern Democrats and big-city machines employed. “[If] a political party does not have its foundation in the determination to advance a cause that is right and that is moral,” the 34th president argued as he sought a second term, “then it is not a political party; it is merely a conspiracy to seize power.”

Meet Donald Trump’s Republican Party.

Trump was a more moderate, even liberal, political donor in the decades before he became a presidential candidate. But he has always been, first and foremost, an egocentric self-aggrandizer who values nothing so much as victory. Far from making him a fluid and flexible politician—one who might, as Trump suggested during his 2016 campaign, be able to sample the best ideas without being burdened by the demands of billionaire campaign donors and corporate lobbyists—President Trump’s desperate need for approval and support has steered him toward a win-at-any-cost calculus that puts him squarely in the camp of contemporary conservatives on

the vast majority of issues. He needed them to attain power in 2016, and he needs them to retain power now; just as corporate conservatives need him to deliver the economic benefits that are coveted by the billionaire class, and social conservatives need him to deliver the Supreme Court nominations and reactionary policies that are the demand of the religious right.

So Trump has embraced the ugliest politics of the right. This was most evident in mid-August of 2017, when the president inflamed an already-tense situation by suggesting moral equivalence between white supremacists and neo-Nazis, who stirred violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, killing one person and injuring many others, and the anti-racist forces that challenged them. But the president's claim that "fine people" marched under the banner of the slavery-defending Confederacy was part of a

much broader embrace of extremist critiques and rhetoric.

As president, Trump has constantly, and with ever increasing vitriol, attacked the nation's free press. The commander-in-chief's tweets and his bombastic statements at campaign-style rallies with supporters around the country—accusing cable networks such as CNN of peddling "fake news," declaring that "the failing @nytimes writes false story after false story about me..."—get most of the attention. And the consequences of a president so directly and so steadily attacking the free press ought not be underestimated, as they well illustrate his tendency toward "conservatism without conscience" authoritarianism.

Words matter, especially when they are shouted from the "bully pulpit" of the White House.

## **Media Policies and the Attack on Net Neutrality**

When it comes to media policy and the future of journalism, however, Trump's words are less consequential than his official agenda. No component of that agenda more threatens the democratic discourse than this administration's plan to gut net-neutrality rules. With newspapers dying, radio syndicated and nationalized, broadcast television commercialized beyond relevance, and cable television mired in scandal and dead-end punditry, the internet is the essential tool for the communication of ideas and the mobilization of those who choose to resist the autocratic impulses of the president and his crony-capitalist cabal.

So it should come as no surprise that Trump and his Federal Communications Commission chairman, Ajit Pai, have set out to throttle net neutrality—the first amendment of the internet

that guarantees equal protection for all voices in the digital universe where we now live. In April of 2017, Pai outlined what *The New York Times* described as "a sweeping plan to loosen the government's oversight of high-speed internet providers, a rebuke of a landmark policy approved two years ago to ensure that all online content is treated the same by the companies that deliver broadband service to Americans."

Citizens flooded the FCC with pleas for the preservation of net neutrality because they knew that, without a guarantee of equal treatment of all content, the balance would be tipped toward messages from a billionaire class that already dominates too much of the national debate. When the Free Press Action Fund, Demand Progress, and Fight for the Future organized a July 12 "Internet-Wide Day of Action to Save Net Neu-

trality," they were joined in support of an open internet by the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Library Association, the Center for Media Justice, Color Of Change, Common Cause, Creative Commons, the Electronic Freedom Foundation, Greenpeace, NARAL Pro-Choice America, the National Hispanic Media Coalition, New America, Public Knowledge, Rock the Vote and the Women's March movement. Web-based innovators such as Airbnb, Amazon, CREDO, eBay, Etsy, Expedia, Facebook, Kickstarter, Mozilla, Netflix, OKCupid, reddit, Soundcloud, Spotify, Tinder, Twitter, Vimeo, and Yelp joined in outcry. Free Press reported that more than five million people sent emails to Congress. More than two million people sent comments to the FCC—nearly tripling the record for most submitted in a single day. And people placed more than 124,000 calls to their members of Congress.

But that does not mean that the American people will get what they want. Pai, a former telecommunications-industry lawyer, has repeatedly signaled that he wants to dismantle the net-neutrality protections that were put in place during the Obama years, following a massive years-long campaign by democracy advocates and consumer and civil rights groups.

Trump's man at the FCC is not stopping there. During the first months of the new administration, Pai employed the regulatory-agency equivalent of executive orders to gut programs that would expand broadband access, guard against consolidation of media ownership, and enforce disclosure of sources of spending on political ads. "This is what government by billionaires and special interests looks like," said former Federal Communications Commission chairman Michael Copps.

At the same time, the Trump administration has proposed eliminating funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and phasing out funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

At present, the CPB funnels roughly \$445 million a year of federal money to the nearly 1,500 public radio and television stations of the NPR and PBS networks, as well as to community stations around the country. A tiny portion of the federal budget, this \$445 million makes a life-and-death difference for rural and small-town radio and TV stations that are indispensable sources of news and intelligent programming.

The proposed cuts have been so devastating that even some congressional Republicans have pushed back, and the worst of the cuts may be averted—for now. But the Trump administration has again, on this count, made its agenda clear. In addition to attacking major media outlets like CNN and *The New York Times*, the president wants to make it harder for public and community broadcasters to provide an alternative to the dust storm of "fake news" and "alternative facts" that has developed since the 1990s, when congressional Republicans (in cooperation with Democratic President Bill Clinton) approved the Telecommunications Act of 1996. That measure, a classic example of what goes wrong when corporations and self-serving politicians of both parties write the rules, unleashed a wave of ownership consolidation that shuttered radio newsrooms and silenced local talk. In the place of regional and ideological diversity came the big-media syndication frenzy that made Rush Limbaugh and other conservative talkers ubiquitous.

At a time when the United States should be supercharging public and community media to prevent development of news deserts, where the only "information" comes from corporate networks and partisan websites, Trump and White House chief strategist Steve Bannon are dusting off the media-policy wish lists developed by conservatives in the 1990s. There's a reason for this: to weaken competition and diversity, to create one-size-fits-all "newsrooms," and to set-up digital fast lanes for subsidized content and slow lanes for the fact-based democratic discourse that is necessary not merely to resist Trumpism

but to develop alternatives to it. Democrats and Republicans have historically recognized the necessity of media diversity and competition, and some Republicans still sound the old themes. As Trump was ramping up his attacks on the media in February 2017, Arizona Senator John McCain said: “[If] you want to preserve democracy as we know it, you have to have a free and many times adversarial press. And without it, I am afraid that we would lose so much of our individual liberties over time. That’s how dictators get started.”

McCain is right. But his is an often lonely voice in the Republican caucus on Capitol Hill. Many prominent Republicans have begun to embrace Trump’s authoritarian agenda when it comes to media and democracy issues. The FCC’s assault on net neutrality has gotten lit-

tle pushback from congressional Republicans, many of whom are beholden to the telecommunications corporations that would benefit from a restructuring of the internet allowing profits to be made by charging for access to the “fast lanes.” And consolidation of media ownership is accelerating with little oversight from the Republican-controlled Congress.

Even more concerning is the cheerleading on the part of many top Republicans—with quiet acquiescence by many others—for Trump’s most direct assaults on democracy. Lies about “voter fraud” and “illegal voting,” which were once dismissed as evidence of Trump’s delusional recklessness, have become central to the agenda of his administration and to the party that sustains it.

## “Rigged Elections” and Voter Disenfranchisement

During the 2016 campaign, Trump caused a stir when he suggested that he might refuse to accept an election result that did not declare him the winner. In the final debate of the race, moderator Chris Wallace attempted to lead the candidates through an issue-oriented discussion—even as Trump and Clinton wrangled over who was “the puppet” of Vladimir Putin. But the essential takeaway from the night was Trump’s response to Wallace’s question about how the billionaire might deal with defeat. Noting Trump’s frequent complaints in the final weeks of the campaign about a “rigged election,” Wallace asked a question for which the candidate must have prepared.

“Mr. Trump,” Wallace began, “I want to ask you about one last question in this topic. You have been warning at rallies recently that this election is rigged and that Hillary Clinton is in the process of trying to steal it from you. Your run-

ning mate Governor Pence pledged on Sunday that he and you—his words—will absolutely accept the result of this election. Today your daughter Ivanka said the same thing. I want to ask you here on this stage tonight, do you make the same commitment that you will absolutely, sir, that you will absolutely accept the result of this election?”

Trump could have said that he expected to do just that. He could have offered a tutorial regarding the process and indicated that he would accept the results unless the election proved to be so close that recounts were required—in which case he could have explained the steps that he would take to assure that calm would be maintained during the period of review. He could have phrased his answer in many ways to signal his respect for the process—and for a standard of political behavior that dates back to the first years of the republic.

But Trump did nothing of the sort. "I will look at it at the time. I'm not looking at anything now. I will look at it at the time," said Trump.

Then the candidate began to tick off the falsehoods that he might employ in order to try and discredit a result that he appeared to be temperamentally incapable of accepting: "What I've seen, what I've seen is so bad. First of all, the media is so dishonest and so corrupt. And the pile-on is so amazing. *The New York Times* actually wrote an article about it, that they don't even care. It's so dishonest. And they have poisoned the minds of the voters..."

Trump raged on, repeating discredited right-wing talking points about "millions of people that are registered to vote that shouldn't be registered to vote," griping some more about "the corrupt media" and concluding with a rant about how Clinton "should never have been allowed to run for the presidency based on what she did with e-mails and so many other things." Finally, Wallace made the essential intervention:

*Sir, there is a tradition in this country, in fact one of the prides of this country is the peaceful transition of power. And that no matter how hard fought a campaign is, that at the end of the campaign, that the loser concedes to the winner. Not saying that you're necessarily going to be the loser or the winner. But that the loser concedes to the winner, and that the country comes together in part for*

*the good of the country. Are you saying you're not prepared now to commit to that principle?*

"What I'm saying is I'll tell you at the time," Trump responded, almost gleefully. "I'll keep you in suspense, okay?"

That was, as Clinton noted, a "horrifying" statement. "[This] is not the way our democracy works," the Democratic nominee explained:

*We've been around for 240 years. We've had free and fair election. We've accepted the outcomes when we may not have liked them. And that is what must be expected of anyone standing on a debate stage during a general election. Let's be clear about what he is saying and what that means. He is denigrating, he is talking down our democracy. And I for one am appalled that somebody who is the nominee of one of our two major parties would take that kind of position.*

Trump was so appalling that most Americans rejected his candidacy. Fifty-four percent of voters cast their ballots for someone other than Trump. Almost three million more voters cast ballots for Clinton than for Trump. Only narrow advantages in three battleground states—Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—tipped an archaic and anti-democratic Electoral College in Trump's favor and made him president.

Trump was not satisfied. He still objected, not as a sore loser but as a sore winner.

## Fighting a "Problem" that Does Not Exist

Infuriated by arguments that he lacked a mandate, the president, who had once condemned the Electoral College as an undemocratic anachronism, now embraced it. But then he went further, making his griping part of the agenda of his administration—perhaps the most dangerous part.

During his first official meeting with congressional leaders, the 45th president claimed that the reason he lost the national popular vote on November 8 was because three to five million "illegals" cast ballots for Hillary Clinton. Two days later, on the fifth full day of his presidency, Trump doubled down on his big lie and turned it into a

threat, tweeting that: "I will be asking for a major investigation into VOTER FRAUD, including those registered to vote in two states, those who are illegal..."

The news that Trump was again peddling "voter fraud" fantasies had headline writers struggling with the challenge posed by a prevaricating president. "Without evidence, Trump tells lawmakers 3 million to 5 million illegal ballots cost him the popular vote," declared the *Washington Post* topline. USA Today went with "Trump Again Makes Debunked Claim: 'Illegals' Cost Me Popular Vote." *The New York Times* was blunter: "Trump Repeats Lie About Popular Vote in Meeting With Lawmakers."

Indeed, Trump's claims were verifiably false. Election officials said so. Journalists who observed the election and reviewed Trump's claims about it said so. The investigative journalism project ProPublica reported: "We had 1,100 people monitoring the vote on Election Day. We saw no evidence the election was 'rigged.'" ProPublica noted that its reporters had found "no evidence that undocumented immigrants voted illegally." The Pulitzer Prize-winning PolitiFact project concluded that

*Neither Trump nor his allies have presented any evidence of widespread illegal voting. In reality, studies have consistently shown that voter fraud is nowhere near common enough to call into question millions and millions of votes. Indeed, the ability to carry off such a far-reaching conspiracy—potentially involving millions of people over the course of several months and without being noticed by election administration officials, many of them in states controlled by Republicans—is ridiculously illogical. We rate Trump's statement Pants on Fire.*

As in: a pants-on-fire lie. Yet, the president persisted in his prevarications. Why?

He was speaking the language of his conservative base in order to retain their loyalty. But he was doing something else, as well. He was laying the groundwork for an official agenda that would use the power of government to restruc-

ture voting in a way that election experts say is designed to strengthen the hand of that base while at the same time weakening the hand of Trump's critics.

Claims about "illegal voting," made over many years by conservative commentators, have been used as an excuse to enact laws that make it harder for Americans to vote in states across this country. Election observers have argued that voter-suppression measures played a significant role in giving Trump narrow wins in the handful of states that handed him an Electoral College victory and the presidency. "We have a president-elect who was elected literally with two thumbs and eight fingers on the scale in terms of depressed, suppressed votes in communities all across the country," said NAACP President Cornell William Brooks.

While Brooks was criticizing constraints on democracy that warp election results, conservative operatives have often been open about their desire to tighten those constraints. Conservative political strategist Paul Weyrich famously told a 1980 gathering of the Religious Roundtable that:

*So many of our Christians have what I call the goo-goo syndrome: good government. They want everybody to vote. I don't want everybody to vote. Elections are not won by a majority of people, they never have been from the beginning of our country and they are not now. As a matter of fact, our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down.*

Even before Trump began tweeting about taking formal steps to address a "problem" that did not exist, Republican officials around the country were moving to make it harder to vote—especially in states where their margins were narrow. After the Michigan House endorsed strict "Voter ID" requirements in early December 2016, *The Detroit News* reported that state Representative Jeff Irwin, D-Ann Arbor, said: "There's certainly no proof that any voters who cast ballots without photo identification last month were committing

fraud, but they or their peers could nonetheless face a 'modern-day poll tax' under the legislation." Irwin explained: "This is going to cause confusion and chaos at the polls. There's going to be arguments, voters aren't going to understand, and long lines are going to get even longer. Maybe that's the point."

The point became clearer when Trump announced on May 11, 2017, that he was naming Vice President Mike Pence and Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach to head his new "Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity."

The fix was in. No one had doubts about the advice that Kobach would be giving to the president and to Republicans in Congress. For years, the Kansan had worked with the shadowy American Legislative Exchange Council—a corporate-funded group established to draft "model legislation" to advance right-wing economic and social policies in the 50 states. After Republican strategist Karl Rove urged conservatives to take up the issue of "voter fraud" in 2006, ALEC's Public Safety and Elections Task Force began promoting election "reforms" that advanced Rove's program. Kobach, who along with ALEC itself helped draft anti-immigration legislation that sparked a national controversy after it was enacted in Arizona, made a name for himself by arguing that mobs of "illegally registered aliens" threatened the sanctity of American elections. It was an absurd claim. But it gained traction on the far right and, even after ALEC was forced to abandon its push for a discriminatory "Voter ID" law in the face of loud objections from civil rights groups, Kobach kept spinning his fantasy. Even if the evidence did not support his claims, Kobach found willing allies among cynical conservatives. Why? Congressional Progressive Caucus co-chair Mark Pocan, a voting rights advocate who battled ALEC proposals in the Wisconsin state legislature and now battles Trump's agenda in Congress, explains: "Once they set the rules for elections and campaigns, (corporate and conservative interests) will pretty much call the shots."

After Kobach's election as Kansas secretary of state, he positioned himself as what the American Civil Liberties Union's Voting Rights Project describes as "the king of voter suppression." Kristen Clarke, the president of The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, says: "Kobach is public enemy number one when it comes to voter suppression in our country."

"During his tenure as Kansas' election official, he has championed some of the strictest voting laws in the country, including the state's controversial proof-of-citizenship law, which requires people to provide birth certificates or passports in order to register to vote," noted a lengthy assessment of Kobach by the highly-regarded DC bureau of the McClatchy newspaper group, which added that: "Judges who have ruled against Kobach in voting rights cases have accused him of engaging in 'wordplay meant to present a materially inaccurate picture of the documents' and dismissed his assertions about voter fraud because they were backed by 'scant evidence' or based on 'pure speculation'."

Kobach's claims had been discredited and dismissed for so many years, and in so many ways, that respectable Republicans tended to keep the Kansan at arm's length. But Kobach found a fan in Donald Trump and the president's inner circle. As noted by McClatchy:

*While other secretaries of state, as well as government and academic studies, say occurrences of voter fraud are rare, Kellyanne Conway and other top Trump advisers cited Kobach as the source of the president's unsupported claim that millions of illegal ballots had tipped the popular vote in Democrat Hillary Clinton's favor. So far, Kobach has provided no hard evidence of widespread voter fraud. The author of one study he cited, the Cooperative Congressional Elections Study, has said it actually shows a rate of noncitizen voting of about zero.*

When Trump made Kobach the dominant player on his Orwellian "Commission on Election Integrity," Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, D-New York, said that: "Putting an extremist like

Mr. Kobach at the helm of this commission is akin to putting an arsonist in charge of the fire department.”

The 50 states write election laws. And no one knows better than Kris Kobach that conservative state legislators have a penchant for embracing and enacting “model legislation” that is drafted by corporate councils and presidential commissions. Now, Kobach (who tells *The New York Daily News* that “as a practical matter I’ll be leading the commission”) has been positioned by Trump to make a definitional statement regarding not just elections but election laws in the United States. How major? Critics say that the commission has been established both to legitimize Trump’s false claims about massive voter fraud and to advance proposals for radical rewrites of state election laws.

Senator Schumer has decried the commission as “a clear front for constricting the access to vote.” Ari Berman, author of the book *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America*, argued that: “If Trump followed Kobach’s advice and pushed for policies like requiring documentary proof of citizenship for voter registration nationwide, it would have a massively suppressive impact on voting in America.”

This is a major concern of the American Civil Liberties Union. “It’s not surprising that the Trump administration wants Kobach to lead this commission,” explains the group that seeks to defend voting rights. The ACLU continues:

*Both Kobach and Trump have repeatedly dealt in lies about ‘illegal voting.’ We’ve seen this before—throughout our history, politicians have used propaganda about illegal voting to create unnecessary restrictions on the right to vote. And we know who this hurts—people of color, young people, first-time voters, low-income voters. No matter how much they lie, they can’t change the facts. Voter suppression is the real threat to election integrity.*

The ACLU is right. Voter suppression is the real threat not just to election integrity but to representative democracy.

Trump knows this. But it would be absurd to imagine that he would be bothered by the prospect of diminished democracy. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that he relishes it. The political pretender, who now serves as a “conservative without conscience” president, refused to pledge during the campaign to accept the results of an election that he thought he might lose. Since he prevailed in that election with a minority of votes—in a result that denied him a mandate and that cast doubt on his continued political viability—he has spread lies about the functionality of the electoral process. He has not done this merely to sooth his battered ego as a first-time presidential contender who lost by almost three million votes; and he has not established his “Commission on Election Integrity” merely to support and sustain otherwise discredited claims about why he lost the popular vote of a country he claims to speak for. There is a method to what so many dismiss as his madness.

He intends to survive politically. And he has an agenda that seeks to assure that survival.

## It Is Time to Stop Underestimating Trump

“It is dangerous to underestimate Trump’s survival skills,” argues Ronald Klain, who served as a senior aide to Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack

Obama before advising Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign. Trump should not have succeeded as a presidential contender. Yet, he did—at least

in part because Trump's rivals, in the Republican primaries and then in the general election, failed to focus on the cut-throat survival skills that have always defined the man.

Donald Trump "accomplishments" have always been inflated. And not just by Trump's spin. They have been inflated by media and political elites that continue to allow that spin to shape their Trump narratives.

The truth, as confirmed by those who have examined the man's finances, is that Trump was never very good at business. He survived by seeking and exploiting openings that favored his own projects, and his own enrichment. He was often accused of taking the low road, using unethical tactics to prevail. To a far greater extent than "the art of the deal," Trump's business career was always most characterized by a win-at-any-cost survival instinct.

Trump may never be very good at politics. But he survived the race for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination and then the presidency itself by applying the same strategies that he employed as a businessman: identifying and exploiting every opening that favored his own nomination and election. There were those who imagined that Trump might rise to the responsibilities of the presidency once he took office, but that was never a serious prospect—not when there was a low road available for the taking.

Donald Trump evolves. But he does not evolve for the better. He has made himself over in order to survive, first in the real-estate business, subsequently in the entertainment industry, and now in politics.

Trump has burned too many bridges to ever be a genuinely popular president. His political survival depends on a right-wing "conservatism without conscience" agenda that embraces austerity and militarism, that seeks to divide people along lines of race and ethnicity and gender and sex-

uality by stirring unwarranted fears and crude animosity, that undermines basic rights and liberties, and that shreds both the social-safety net and the social contract.

That's not a popular agenda. Polls show that most Americans reject it, by specific measures and in general. Six months into his presidency, Trump's approval rating in a July Washington Post/ABC News poll was 36 percent—a number media reports described as "the lowest six-month approval rating of any president in polls dating back to 70 years."

How exactly does Trump intend to make an unpopular agenda a winning agenda? He's betting on a divide-and-conquer strategy that tells Americans not to believe what they see with their own eyes, that demonizes investigative reporting as "fake news," that peddles political spin as "alternative facts," and that uses a combination of lies about "illegal voting" and suppressive legislation to narrow the promise of democracy.

The answer to the question of whether Trump will succeed or fail does not rest with him. It rests with his critics, in the media and in politics, in Washington and across the country (and around the world). The critique of this president must become more realistic and more sophisticated. Trump can no longer be dismissed as an "idiot" or a "fool" or an "egomaniac." There are, of course, times when those descriptions are technically accurate. But they are never sufficient. Donald Trump is the president of the United States. He is an immensely powerful man. That power makes this particular president, with all of his flaws, an incredibly dangerous threat. But what makes him even more threatening is the fact that he is a man on a mission. He has an agenda. He is advancing it.

That advancement will only be blocked if good people can stop focusing on his erratic personality and start focusing on his dangerously coherent agenda.