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The Remaking of the United States by Donald Trump

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Donald Trump has exploited America's deep divisions to upend its national identity. Fascism often slips in quietly—it thrives on emotional fervour rather than rational debate, eroding moral order from within.

The sweeping transformations now unfolding in the United States, both in its domestic affairs and foreign policy during Donald Trump's second tenure may appear implausible at first glance. However, beneath these shifts lies a complex political and social current that defies precise definition. Like many others, I shall refer to it as right-wing populism. Populism's most potent appeal lies in its ideological emptiness—it is a mould that can reshape any prevailing notion into a new, often disruptive, form.

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Since January, I have been teaching a semester at the Virginia Military Institute, which has given me the opportunity to engage in conversations with a broad spectrum of American citizens. While most of them are educated, I have also had the chance to speak with individuals from working-class backgrounds. Naturally, under the present circumstances, not everyone has spoken candidly. Yet, since I approached these interactions without any institutional or research-related agenda, I found people more willing to exchange views freely. Much of what I write today draws on these dialogues.

Attraction of populism

People are often drawn to authoritarian leaders during times of economic crisis, identity-based uncertainty, and social unrest because such leaders offer an ostensibly credible promise of stability and security. Authoritarians typically project decisiveness as an attribute that many perceive as more effective and dependable than the often slow and fragmented processes of liberal democracy. Disillusionment grows among segments of the population in response to political corruption, economic inequality, and social decay. As wealth and opportunities are redistributed, traditionally dominant classes may begin to lose their influence, while newly empowered groups gradually assert theirs. These competing forces rarely find common ground. In such an environment, the rise of a strong “protector” figure holds natural appeal for those who feel left behind.

Moreover, authoritarian leaders often harness the rhetoric of nationalism, traditional values, and a unified national identity to inflame collective emotion, forging a heightened sense of belonging in a fractured society. This appeal, however, frequently comes with a significant downside—the erosion of individual liberties and the weakening of democratic institutions, which ultimately harm society. Still, in troubled times, many are willing to overlook these costs, drawn instead to the assertive and unwavering demeanor of populist leaders. It is in this way that figures like Trump consolidate their political power.

Judging populism solely through a moral lens is unproductive because it overlooks the underlying political and social realities that give rise to the phenomenon. Populism is an expression of genuine grievances and discontent; evaluating it only in terms of moral virtue or ideological purity fails to uncover its root causes or actual consequences. This approach often leads to moral condemnation and withdrawal rather than meaningful engagement, thereby diminishing the potential for real change. To analyse populism and counter its rise using democratic methods requires a response that is both political and structural, going beyond mere ethical considerations.

Trumpism: Origins and Features

Trump's erratic behavior and rhetorical flamboyance in the press and on social media often obscure his true intentions. At his core, Trump is a showman—an agent of disruption; an instinct-driven politician who acts on impulse and the mood of the moment. He is a master of polarisation, which constitutes both the magnetic appeal and the repellent force of his politics. Trump is not merely a political figure; he is a reflection of an era, an embodiment of internal discontent, and a harbinger of deep socio-political transformation. Today's US is navigating its path through his unpredictability—where trust in institutions is waning, division is outpacing unity, and the very meaning of truth has become uncertain.

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We know that Trump's rise was not an accident. It is the culmination of long-brewing discontent shaped by globalisation, revolutionary technological shifts, cultural evolution, and widening economic inequality. Many Americans—particularly those in rural areas, deindustrialised towns, and among the unemployed—feel overlooked and abandoned. Trump speaks their language. He validates their anger and converts it into political capital. He is a master of paradoxical, often misleading, but emotionally resonant promises. His now iconic pledge to “Make America Great Again” has stirred a sense of purpose in millions—not merely as an ideological revival, but as a powerful invocation of nostalgia; a yearning for a constructed past that offers the illusion of unity, dignity, and security. This imagined past remains Trump's most potent political weapon.

Trump's political narrative is rooted in the American populist tradition, especially its Jacksonian aspect, which highlights anti-elitism, nationalism, and a combative, majoritarian democracy. This tradition, which traces back to President Andrew Jackson in the 19th century, sought to wrest political power from entrenched elites and return it to the common (predominantly white, working-class) citizen. Trump strategically invokes this legacy. By presenting himself as a political outsider, he positions himself in opposition to a perceived corrupt and detached Washington establishment. His messaging appeals directly to white, less formally educated, working-class, small-business, and agrarian communities—many of whom feel marginalised by globalisation, demographic shifts, and progressive cultural changes.

A defining feature of Trump's politics is its combative tone, his deliberate circumvention of traditional media in favour of direct communication with supporters, and his emphasis on national sovereignty and protectionist economics. Debating the factual basis of this rhetoric is largely beside the point. Its resonance with disaffected voters is undeniable. Immigrants, especially those from Latin America and Muslim-majority countries, have faced severe immigration policies, unlike others. African Americans, indigenous populations, and other minority groups have experienced increased discrimination in their pursuit of civil rights and social justice. The rights of women and the LGBTQ+ community have also seen notable setbacks. Overall, Trump appears determined to stifle the legacy of liberal, multicultural politics, seeking instead to uproot what he frames as a cloistered, elitist political order.

Under Trump's leadership, the tone and structure of American politics have shifted dramatically. Democratic ideals like peaceful transitions, press freedom, and the rule of law, once highly valued, now seem weak and under attack. Trump has shown how, through personal loyalty, conspiracy rhetoric, and the distortion of facts, a large segment of the population can be manipulated. This may be his most dangerous legacy—that one can exploit political systems, bend norms to one's advantage, and, if bolstered by popular support, do so with little consequence.

Trump 2.0

In many ways, the distinction between Trump 1.0 and Trump 2.0 lies in both tone and intent. Trump's first term (2017-2021) showed a blend of populist confidence and respect for established rules, resulting in frequent disruptions but still within the bounds of democratic processes. Despite a nationalist, anti-globalist agenda driving his policies, his administration included traditional Republicans and at times bowed to institutional pressures.

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In contrast, Trump 2.0 indicates a sharper, retaliatory approach, driven by anger about the 2020 election and surrounded by a more faithful, ideologically consistent team. Unconstrained by re-election and motivated by reshaping the federal bureaucracy, Trump's second term plans appear to prioritise consolidating executive power, targeting adversaries, and undermining institutional checks over transactional populism. In essence, Trump 2.0 signifies a transition from upheaval to stabilisation—a calmer yet possibly more menacing force against democratic principles.

Trump's second tenure has deepened social divisions in the US. The fragmentation extends beyond political disagreement to encompass social identity, moral frameworks, and even the definition of reality itself. A relentless “us versus them” dichotomy now pervades

American public life. Disagreements, previously essential for a healthy democracy, are increasingly regarded as dangerous. While Trump did not invent this division, he has capitalised on it and, in many ways, intensified it. As a result, the ideal of the American “melting pot” has grown dim. In practice, America today is a society marked by internal strife and ideological fragmentation.

Efforts to control the interpretation of national history are marked by a commitment to erase its complexities and diversities, replacing them with a sanitised, unquestioned narrative of glory. This project intends to substitute historical truths with a politically manufactured myth, overlooking past discrepancies, injustices, and conflicts to foster national unity.

As a result, a climate of fear and defensiveness has spread across educational institutions, research bodies, and the cultural sphere. The Trump administration has taken a series of harsh measures to ban policies promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), including withholding grants and imposing new compliance directives on institutions. Although many of these actions are being challenged in court, there is no assurance that the American judiciary will stand against this new McCarthyism.

A cornerstone of America’s strength has long been the extraordinary expansion of science and technology, powered by both state support and private capital. Trump now appears poised to undermine that very abundance. On the one hand, there is China’s rapid ascent and the narrowing technological gap; on the other, Trump’s policies threaten to stifle creativity itself. America’s rise was built on a global convergence of the brightest minds. Today, that tide has reversed. A section of the younger generation, swept up in the politics of emotion and division, seems unable to recognise this basic truth.

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Trump’s economic policies, too, represent a new form of protectionist regulation. In place of free markets, we now see the rhetoric of economic nationalism—tariffs, sanctions, and trade wars justified as protective measures for domestic industry. Many believe that this is how America can reclaim its lost greatness; here too, reasoned, science-based argument gives way to emotion. Trump views the state not as a neutral arbiter, but as a defender of a distinct socio-economic identity at odds with globalisation.

Trump’s presidency has also fundamentally reshaped the very conception of executive power. Through the unchecked use of executive orders, political pressure on the judiciary, and the appointment of loyalists to key administrative agencies, the office of the president has been transformed into a locus of personal authority. The absence of effective Congressional oversight, the growing politicisation of the judiciary, and the slow pace of legal processes have all helped set a new precedent: Trump has once again demonstrated that with sufficient popularity, much can be tolerated.

I once asked whether the future of American democracy would rest solely on institutions, or whether it would surrender to the forces of personality-driven politics. Young people generally favour a robust democracy; by contrast, the less educated appear more inclined toward policy effectiveness. The Democrats’ ineffectual and half-hearted policies, combined with the Republicans’ empty rhetoric, have driven many towards Trump’s unorthodox and seemingly reactionary positions. For many, the complexity of critical thinking is less attractive than the promise of strong, protective leadership.

Political and technological control

One of the key pillars of the Trumpian strategy has been the discrediting of mainstream media and the creation of an alternative information ecosystem. In doing so, he has constructed a curated reality where opinion replaces the boundaries of truth. Trump and Elon Musk’s growing alliance is a case in point. It signals a dangerous new era of concentrated political and technological control, highlighting the growing power of tech-capitalism.

Musk’s purchase and renaming of Twitter as X have transformed the site into a focal point for political discussion, characterised by algorithmic promotion of inflammatory content. With lawsuits and media scrutiny surrounding him, Trump’s re-emergence signifies a strategic alliance—Musk contributes the technical base, Trump the persuasive message. Through this symbiosis, Trump sidesteps traditional media filters, rallies his base, and potentially influences public opinion with less oversight.

The merging of political goals and technological control bypasses traditional editorial oversight, unlike previous media environments, establishing a direct conduit of power and obscuring the boundary between business and public debate. Power is shifting in a volatile reshaping of democratic communication; it is centralised not only within the state but also in the hands of a few powerful tech leaders with their own agendas. In today’s US, many citizens are unable to connect—not just politically or morally—but even on a shared

factual basis. I can think of no greater threat to democracy.

His legacy is not merely a shift in policy; it is a profound test of the nation's soul. The new reality of Trump's America is being shaped by politics rooted in division, distrust, self-doubt, and fear.

Likewise, Trump's second term has brought a profound shift in American foreign policy—one that affects not only the domestic political landscape but also the trajectory of global politics. An erratic and domineering approach, a preference for transactional diplomacy, a tendency to judge allies and adversaries purely in terms of short-term gain, and a troubling absence of credibility have brought international relations to a critical juncture. Under Trump's leadership, the US is at once unyielding in its pursuit of national interest and increasingly estranged from multilateral cooperation.

Can US populism become fascism?

Donald Trump's legacy is not merely a shift in policy; it is a profound test of the nation's soul. The new reality of Trump's America is being shaped by politics rooted in division, distrust, self-doubt, and fear. The country now faces a difficult question—how can a fractured, disillusioned, and historically uncertain nation rediscover its commitment to democracy, liberty, pluralism, vibrant intellectual life, and its role as a land of dreams for so many?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that true freedom arises when individuals live according to laws they have made themselves, laws that reflect the “general will” of society. Those who pursue only personal interest and reject this collective will, he argued, are not truly free. Thus, society must, at times, compel such individuals to follow the path of the common good. Modern populists like Trump portray themselves as guardians of freedom while characterising dissenters as either selfish or misguided. In doing so, they redefine freedom—not as individual autonomy, but as obedience to authority and a commitment to order. They prioritise unity, discipline, and emotional resonance over reason, critique, and common sense.

Trump is not a thinker, and even the sincerity of his convictions is questionable. However, his manipulation of America's deep-seated divisions has profoundly and fundamentally shaken the nation's sense of self. It is worth remembering that fascism arrives quietly. The moral disorder it breeds is nurtured not by reason, but by emotion. Fascism prefers propaganda to truth, and its most fertile ground lies in unspoken insecurities. It thrives on contradiction, yet finds contentment in it.

Populism can become fascism if it succeeds in transforming the underlying moral foundations of a society and its politics. In the US, people are beginning—slowly but surely—to rise in resistance to that transformation. And so they must.

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