

# A Far Better Path

Robert Bruce Adolph

**Donald J. Trump has been defeated at the ballot box. The US Electoral College, a vestige of the country's racist pre-industrial past, failed to save him, as it did in 2016. As expected by many, he refuses (as of this writing) to admit defeat, claiming without evidence to have been cheated out of the Oval Office—the first chief executive in the history of the Republic to refuse to concede an election. In fact, he has suffered a thrashing of historic proportions: losing the popular as well as the Electoral College vote by a significant margin. This very public drubbing can easily be called what it is: a repudiation of his presidency. In 2016, Trump managed to make the election a referendum on Hillary Clinton; this year's election became a referendum on his multiple failures in leadership.**

Once Trump is successfully removed from office, the global hope is that the future Biden Administration will return the nation to something approximating the status quo prior to the 2016 election: where reason and compromise are not considered the equivalent of a nasty four-letter word; where allies are valued; where Russia and China are recognized and treated as strategic and economic competitors; where dictators are not accorded friendship status; where allies in Europe and Asia can look to DC without fear of an unpredictable and wholly self-interested White House; where obvious racism is not tolerated; and where there is a clear recognition that all humanity share a planet with ever-more-limited resources and rising temperatures that will all-too-soon have catastrophic results for the whole of our kind.

Tragically, the damage done by Trump while in office is substantial. The US national debt now exceeds 3 trillion dollars. The US Civil Service, which includes diplomats at the Department of State, is devastated. The unemployment rate has skyrocketed. Social media sites have become breeding grounds for the spread of hatred, fear, and misinformation. Consequently, trust in both democ-

racy and media is badly eroded. Political partisanship has never been worse. Most importantly, untold thousands of American citizens died needlessly in the pandemic because this president refused to devise a national response plan: leaving the lion's share of the work to be done by state governors, who lacked the necessary resources to deal effectively with the crisis. Americans are still dying as a result. Many of those deaths are on his head.

## WHY?

The question on the minds of many on both sides of the Atlantic is: Why was he elected? How did such a clearly flawed and amoral individual win the arguably most powerful political position on the planet? This thorny subject will occupy politicians, pundits, and academics for years to come. However, we can intuit much from the available evidence.

The major problem in American politics today relates directly to money. Many of those that have money want to keep and increase it. Those that don't have money are often politically marginalized as a result. The reality of



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America today may be neither Republican or Democrat: it might instead be defined by a divide between those that have funds and those that do not. Ever since the US Supreme Court's wrong-headed 2010 "Citizens United" decision, Dark Money, as defined by the brilliant author Jane Mayer, has poured into Republican Party coffers, provided by some of the nation's arch-conservative 1% (billionaires). The same is true of Democratic Party funding, but to a far lesser degree. This means that politics in America is now badly tainted with self-interest and greed. It costs a small fortune to remain in office, so elected federal officials spend more and more of their time seeking funds for their own reelection. Nobody currently in office seems to have the political wherewithal to change the system.

Essentially, and for those who wish to remain or enter Congress, huge amounts of cash are required. Special interest groups provide the treasure chest of funds that

makes electoral victory possible. Incumbents have an enormous advantage in the race for bucks because they can more easily draw from that well. Anyone wishing to remain in office must play the game. This tends to reinforce the seemingly already accepted notion of a permanent political class in America. It is a system that benefits the wealthy and powerful to the detriment of the general populace. It is important to note that neither party has the market wholly cornered on corruption and mendacity, although the Republican Party seemingly embraced "alternative facts" and increasing the riches of the already wealthy some time ago.

Again, the question is why a significant proportion of the American electorate held their collective noses and chose to support an obviously corrupt man to perform the house-cleaning that so many correctly perceive was needed. Essentially, many sensed that their political system had gone sour. They did not trust their elected



Thousands of American citizens died needlessly in the pandemic because this president refused to devise a national response plan. Depicted is Dr. Anthony Fauci speaking at a COVID-19 press briefing with President Donald Trump listening in the background (photo: Alex Gakos/Shutterstock.com)

officials to make it right. So, someone from outside of the political sphere had to do the job and “drain the swamp.” The logic of their belief was in my estimation reasonably sound. Tragically, their choice of Trump was not. The swamp is now far bigger and more malodorous than ever before. Election reform, to limit the impact of dark money, is now more necessary than ever before. The ultra-wealthy in America, particularly amongst con-

servatives, have amassed far too much influence in the halls of power.

**HOW?**

Trump supporters described as “deplorables” by Hillary Clinton at that time no doubt wished to believe that he was their political messiah. However, wishing it so, seldom makes it so. It is critically important to point out



that his election in 2016 would not have been possible without the full-throated support of the Fox News Channel. Seldom in the history of human events have so few made so many excuses for one so unworthy. The Fox News' politically weaponized opinion programs catapulted the former reality TV star into candidacy, while making the owner of the right-wing channel even wealthier. Let me be clear. The Fox News Channel, and others, make money by feeding the concerns and stoking the fears of

those conservative Americans who feel alienated from their own government: callously exploiting and exacerbating the pre-existing partisan divide.

By thoroughly demonizing the political left and mainstream media, right-wing news programming also created a context whereby many of Trump's supporters felt justified - and even compelled - to support a man who is profoundly ethically bankrupt. In other words, no matter how badly this president acted, he was still preferable to what they felt was the earth-shattering possibility of a return to Democratic Party control of the ship of state.

How did this come to be? "Niche reporting," as conceived by the serial rapist and former head of Fox News, Roger Ailes, made millions for News Corp, the parent company of Fox News. This Fox propaganda machine has been enormously successful in convincing a significant portion of the electorate that the "Deep State" exists; that Democrats will take away their guns; and that "Antifa" is an existential threat to the nation. None of the aforementioned allegations is objectively true.

The confluence of Fox News and Trump was a marriage made in a selfish and self-absorbed heaven for a while. They had common cause. The former was interested in making money and expanding influence, the latter in feeding his clearly insatiable ego. It served the interests of both to demonize the political left, and with it, the mainstream media as "fake news." The Republican Party climbed aboard that train because they found significant political benefit in it.

#### **REPUBLICAN TRIBALISM'S IMPACT**

The result was predictable - a virulent form of grassroots right-wing political tribalism emerged characterized by shameless claims that Democrats are not "real Americans." The individual who has told more obvious lies to the American public than any other chief executive in the history of the Republic, and can be proven to have done so, claims to be the only truth teller on the political stage. Even at this late date, Trump supporters continue to buy this canard because they desperately want to believe it.

A brief story might help me make my next point. I was once caught-up in the middle of a gunfight in Sana'a, Yemen. While unarmed and desperately attempting to dodge bullets, I noted that there were armed men in both police uniforms and traditional garb firing on what I found out later were other men also wearing police uniforms and traditional garb. This unusual situation was a consequence of tribalism. The initial fight was between the police and a specified tribal group. When some of the uniformed policemen realized that their adversaries were



**It costs a small fortune to remain in office, so elected federal officials spend more and more of their time seeking funds for their own reelection. Nobody currently in office seems to have the political wherewithal to change the system. Depicted is the Capitol Hill building in Washington DC (photo: Andrea Izotti/Shutterstock.com)**

members of their tribe, they immediately switched sides and began shooting at their police comrades. For those who switched sides, the idea of right and wrong never came into it.

I have had the good fortune over the last four decades to have travelled widely. In that time, I observed the negative impacts of tribalism in Africa, Middle East, and Asia.

I never thought to see humankind's oldest means of social organization take hold in America. In my experience, tribalism dispenses with reason in favor of group identity. This is the danger presented by the phenomenon in the context of the Republican Party, the suspension of critical thinking and individual morality in favor of the tribe. In the US, where the individual was first made sovereign in national founding documents, tribalist right-wing group



identity now appears to be largely triumphant, to the detriment of all.

#### **A LENGTHY CONCLUSION**

While serving in the US Army many years ago, I trained as a psychological operations officer, where I learned to recognize propaganda. The Fox News Channel, and others, spew right-wing propaganda that masquerades as news. They regularly traffic in lies, half-truths, and unproven conspiracy theories. But they do enrich themselves in the process - telling their conservative viewership precisely

what they wish to hear: creating a perverse kind of self-reinforcing delusion that the nation is under severe threat from within. Truth, regrettably, was, and still is, sacrificed on the altar of the monetization of news programming. Right-wing media is shamelessly partisan in the committed pursuit of money and influence at the expense of democracy. In other words, much of the right-leaning media lies. Moreover, they regularly get away with it.

In fairness, the US mainstream media does have an unconscious bias toward the left of the political spectrum. There are many reasons, but the most important may be college education. The left-leaning bias of college graduates has been reported in multiple statistical studies. I would only point out that unconscious bias has little relationship to fully conscious and bellowing support.

What does this bode for the future? Trump may soon be a thing of the past. However, his enablers within the Republican Party are still there. The Republican Party leadership has consistently chosen ideology over country. Fox News continues to spew angst and acrimony, having fully politically weaponized the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which protects free speech, getting wealthier doing it, and while acting in accord with the desires of many of the hard-right filthy rich.

*The Washington Post* reported that three different research efforts all but confirm that Fox News watchers were “duped” into thinking that that the Coronavirus posed little danger. In other words, and per Irene Pasquetto of Harvard University, “We are receiving an incredible number of studies and solid data showing that consuming far-right media and social media content was strongly associated with low concern about the virus....” Put still another way, listening to Fox News placed American lives at risk. Mainstream media, often touted as “Fake News” by the political right, on the other hand, generally kept the public well informed of the hazards associated with COVID-19, per the above-mentioned studies. Fox News viewers have been badly informed on any number of other issues in the public sphere as well.

The soon-to-be-former US Commander-in-Chief did not create the chasm that currently exists in the national political landscape between Democrats and Republicans, but he, Fox News and others, have exploited it for their own gain, while forcing that fissure far wider than ever before. The conservative ultra-rich have entirely too much power and influence. The key division in the emerging reality of America may no longer be between the political left and right wings, but the haves and have nots. Finally, all media need to review their editorial policies with an eye toward objectively reporting the news with-



Donald Trump's election in 2016 would not have been possible without the full-throated support of the Fox News Channel. Depicted is a Fox News Channel microphone and broadcast truck (photo: [Christianthiel.net/Shutterstock.com](http://Christianthiel.net/Shutterstock.com))

out consideration of the financial bottom line. Of course, that will not happen unless new laws governing news programming are enacted in the US Congress. Even the First Amendment to the US Constitution should perhaps have some limits.

An even more important issue concerns Trump's self-serving supporters in government, who should be brought to account. Trump himself was a symptom of a much deeper problem. His Republican enablers in the White House, Congress, and state governors' mansions proved to be utterly consumed with their own self-interest—backing an individual they knew was utterly amoral and thoroughly detestable—while betraying their oaths of office. It was apparently all too easy to abandon honorable behavior for personal aggrandizement. They permitted and often participated in the corruption of America: something I previously thought was all but impossible. The wake-up call for concerned citizens of both political parties is unmistakable.

America and her allies could not be destroyed by Nazi Germany or the Japanese Empire. The Soviet Union also failed to defeat its global adversary and allies: falling instead to the massive and troubling contradictions with-

in their own society created by Communism. The United States of America was until recently on a similar path - heading recklessly toward the self-destruction that no external enemy could bring to fruition. The man occupying the White House for the last nearly four years shares much in common with tin-pot dictators and tyrants, who I have seen all too often in the Developing World. The nation dodged a bullet: this time. Trump would have corrupted the nation's democratic institutions further if given the opportunity. Thankfully, America has chosen a far better path.

\*With special appreciation to Professor Ben Lawton of Purdue University.

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**Would you like to react?**

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