The campaign and presidency of Donald Trump with their sustained outbursts of intense intolerance on the political right did not break the impasse that gripped American life, but rather confirmed it. “Trumpism” was the latest form of a virulent populism that has periodically convulsed American politics in times of unusual stress and tension. It began with a “Tea Party” movement, understandably outraged by the Federal bailout (at taxpayer expense) of those institutions—“banks, insurers and auto companies”—responsible for the great economic meltdown of 2008 that left the finances of millions in tatters. Once unleashed, an insurgency spirit is difficult to stifle or resolve. After 2010, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and the liberalism they represented enlarged and expanded Tea Party populism without providing it with either coherence or direction.

The color of Obama’s skin and his multi-racial background led far too many to doubt either his American birth or his loyalty to the nation itself. The “birther” movement together with a number of unjustifiable police shootings after 2012 crystallized the latent racism in American life. “Obamacare” created fresh anxieties in many a heart that the government was taking over one more critical function that should forever be reserved for the responsible man of the house. There were the several hundred Executive Orders and literally countless Executive Memoranda through and by which the President by-passed a gridlocked Congress on such hot-button issues as gun-control, immigration (granting millions of illegals temporary legal status), climate and the environment. To critics like Trump who complained of Obama’s “major power grabs of authority” the country was being regulated to the point of tyranny.ii

“For most evangelicals,” pro-life “was all that mattered,” though in time “Gay marriage” assumed equal prominence. “Evangelicals were particularly put off by Obama’s pro-choice stance. . .” and the President’s subsequent flip on Gay marriage from mild opposition to enthusiastic support (he had the White House illuminated in rainbow colors the evening after the Supreme Court announced the Federal Government must support same-sex marriage) left conservative evangelicals “cringing. . . It all happened too fast.” And “in the hours after the decision they turned to their blogs, websites, and media outlets” to write “apocalyptic opinion pieces on how to cope in a post-Christian society.”iii Inexorably, the notion of a “deep state” within the Federal establishment dedicated to disarming the nation, dethroning Christian religion and flooding the nation with hostile Muslim and Latin criminals took hold.

“Evangelicals are not supposed to hate. But many hate Hillary Clinton and, by extension, all that her equally fervent supporters stand for.” Long before 2016, Mrs. Clinton had been the very embodiment of what radio talk show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh characterized as “feminazis” with their commitments to public careers and to Roe-vs-Wade which promised “the decline of a Christian culture in the United States.”iv Her 1998 defense of her husband’s admitted adultery and her characterization on national television of his political assailants as “part of a ‘vast right wing conspiracy’” alienated thousands if not millions more who found President Clinton’s behavior morally reprehensible on simple ethical grounds. She did herself further harm in 2016 when, clearly exhausted and overwhelmed, she incautiously “placed Trump supporters in a ‘basket of deplorables.’”v

Donald Trump crystallized all of these burning resentments and blatant fears. The man brought to public life a raw contempt and malice (“Crooked Hillary,” “Lying Ted,” “Little Marco”) not seen since the days of George Wallace and Huey Long. Millions responded. Pennsylvania Democratic Congressman Matt Cartwright observed that people in his state “voted for the change candidate and you do that when you are hurting.” For many, there was so much to hurt about. Trump appealed to those who not only felt dispossessed by the new techno society but also inadequate in the face of its fast-paced demands. He invited them to make the country great again by returning to an idealized world that never was when government knew its place and didn’t tell folks with whom they had to live or go to school, or whether they could own guns and openly park heat; a world where borders were clear, when uppity athletes didn’t showcase their contempt for flag and country by kneeling at the National Anthem, when shameful women got abortions far from public view in back-alley clinics, homosexuality was considered a sin against God and the American economy ticked on without hindrance from Washington, D.C. or a
global elite that manipulated domestic politics and the economy to keep wages depressed and send jobs overseas.

Long before his candidacy Trump was a celebrity, and therefore, by the mores of the time, an authority figure. His best-selling book on deal-making and especially his long-running television program, “The Apprentice” glorified the man’s ostensible business acumen and his take-no-prisoners approach to life (“You’re fired!”). When candidate Trump told adoring audiences, “I know exactly what to do folks” while casting doubt on the meaning of truth (“Fake News”) they believed him implicitly and embraced his message of apocalyptic change. Twenty-sixteen was “not merely another four year election” he told his people, but “a crossroads in the history of our civilization” determining whether America would be great again or continue to be torn apart by special domestic and global interests. Ironically, Trump’s deliberate exaggerations and outright lying helped rather than hindered both his candidacy and presidency. This apparent paradox (historically, people have rebelled against those who persistently lie to them) has been explained by recent research suggesting that “sometimes lying can actually make a politician seem more authentic” as followers interpret consistent, “bald-faced” lying “by an interloper as symbolic protests against a crooked establishment;” as a “challenge” to an elite that had gained and maintained its privileged status through lies and moral turpitude of its own. vi

In time, Trump’s varied and repeated assaults against the media, the Federal legal and intelligence establishments, against demonstrated truth itself destroyed any “bedrock of group belief we can agree on. . . It had seemed obvious to some that a modern presidential administration would not defend white nationalists or that the United States government would seek to avoid taking babies from their parents’ arms – or that a man who bragged about harassing women wouldn’t be elected in the first place.” On Independence Day 2017, National Public Radio – long a bête noire of the radical right – tweeted a line-by-line text of the Declaration of Independence; NPR was promptly berated “by angry Americans accusing the organization of spreading seditious anti-Trump propaganda.” vii

In shockingly short time, Trump’s true believers overwhelmed the Republican Party. A significant minority cynically acquiesced, because, after all, Trumpism worked. “His supporters can’t plead ignorance,” one GOP analyst wrote after Trump’s first eighteen months in office. “We pretty much knew what he was before we voted for him. . . He made his living billboard who he is and what he does on tall buildings... He is the most obvious politician we’ve had.” But “when the President rends the fabric of the establishment’s universe he is doing exactly what his supporters want him to do. Instead of being shocked, disappointed or offended, his fans cling to him. They pray ‘Please God, help him do it again...”

Trump’s partisans loved him not for what he was, but for what he did. They perceive their president not as an unapologetic groper of young women, a not-so-subtle racist, a man willing to see immigrant families torn apart, a paranoid where the Mueller investigation into Russian election meddling is concerned (“fake news” and a “rigged witch hunt” that “stains our country”) and leader of a blatantly corrupt inner circle of shady lawyers and financial consultants, but as the lone bulwark against a Washington establishment so malign and so loathsome that millions “prefer the human embodiment of nitroglycerine in the White House, even with its attendant collateral damage, rather than taste again the malignant gruel Washington was serving them.” His adoring voters did not send Trump to Washington “to make the establishment honest. He was elected to destroy it, using their own weapons, if required, subversion and deceit if necessary.” Eight weeks before the 2018 off year elections, a president well-known to prefer the golf links on a Sunday morning to a church service, summoned the nation’s evangelical leadership to the White House to warn that “You’re one election away from losing everything that you’ve got.” If “they” seized even a fraction of Congressional power the coming November, “everything that we have done” would be “overturn[ed]. . .quickly and violently.”

A D.C. taxi driver told a passenger that he voted for Trump knowing “he’d tear things apart. I knew he wouldn’t be the guy who could put things back together. Down the road, we will have to get somebody else smart enough to do that. But Trump is what the country needs right now.”

Moreover, the President’s followers could make the case “that whatever disturbs Washington is working pretty well for them.” The president “largely erased ISIS” while de-regulating broad areas of the economy. He slashed taxes and took credit for “jump-start[ing] jobs and business.” In the summer of 2018, the national economic growth rate was four per-cent, the military was being strengthened, China was at last being challenged and Mr. Trump had recently “stared down” North Korea’s “Little Rocket Man.” At the apex of this list of achievements was a top-to-bottom effort to reform the federal judiciary in order to reflect the political, social and economic prejudices of Trump’s minority constituency. “Equally important,” Trump “treats working Americans with respect, not contempt. As a bonus, he keeps kicking Washington and the media around. To his good fortune, they kick back.”
Trump would continue to thrive, the Republican operative concluded, “until Washington examines itself and sees what millions find incontrovertible. Donald Trump remains the only alternative to the establishment. Their arrogance sustains him. He’ll continue to float above his weaknesses, defying gravity, until Washington suffers an uncharacteristic spasm of humility, kneels in penance, and acknowledges it has to change.”

As these concepts — humility and penance — suggest, while candidate and President Trump spoke about lost factories, lost jobs, lost wages and lost dignity, his followers more often than not cast these economic and social problems in broader religious terms focused on an elitist establishment that had long ago lost whatever moral compass it might once have possessed and was leading the nation toward an abyss of iniquity. As the national economy struggled toward recovery and then expansion under President Obama, evangelicals continued to obsess about abortion, gay rights, gun ownership and a host of related issues. This powerful quarter of the national population voted 81% for what one sympathetic observer admitted was a “race-baiting, xenophobic, lying adulterer” who nonetheless promised to promote and support a firmly conservative federal judiciary.

Three hundred years ago, Dean Swift observed that “We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.” The human condition has not appreciably changed. By 2016 “The fundamentalism that the Republicans had embraced went beyond religion. . . It simplified the world in general: it rolled together many different kinds of anxieties — schools, drugs, race, buggery, Russia, to give just a few; and it offered the simplest, the vaguest solution: Americanism, the assertion of the American self.” When one added guns to the mix, it was largely complete.

Liberals had their own anxieties and agendas. Where the right saw a nation besieged by immigrants, immorality, and an evil media doing the work of global conspirators the left saw a country teeming with privileged white oppressors determined to continue their historic domination of all other elements in society — women, minorities, those of differing sexual orientations, and any other group that might rise to challenge the supremacy of their corrupt value systems. This thinking led ineluctably to the growth of “identity politics” with its emphasis on group victimization and ultimate redemption through various means of “empowerment.” The notion quickly floated through the nation’s intellectual establishment before embedding on college and university campuses, the traditional crossroads where youthful idealism and alienation meet an always restless academy. Professors and administrators now found a solution for guilt over past exclusionary sins with a burst of “inclusory” policies designed to make self-described “minorities” forcibly welcomed. Those students deemed by themselves and enthusiastic faculty and teachers as “marginalized” ethnically, sexually, racially, or in other ways, demanded and got special treatment. On-campus “safe spaces” were found for them and “trigger warnings” were issued by professors and teaching assistants to alert them to texts or other materials that might cause controversy or upset.

Behind this policy lay the contention that words were agents of violence and therefor had to be carefully chosen not to give offense. While there may be near-universal agreement on a few words that do fit the definition and need not be mentioned, the equation itself is inherently subjective. Any careless remark could be interpreted as a blow in the face; any momentary lapse of judgement, a fist in the gut. Self-styled and self-absorbed minority victims could impose their will on self-censoring teachers who understandably feared classroom chaos and even lost jobs.

The sprawling University of California system led the way. By 2018, six campuses had created costly ($4.3 million annually at UCLA) diversity bureaucracies usually headed by a “Vice Chancellor for Equity, Diversity and Inclusiveness.” At the core of UCLA’s bureaucracy is an Intergroup Relations Program “based on” the “intergroup dialogue (IGD) pedagogical model originating from the University of Michigan.” The IGD is defined in typical academese as encouraging “sustained dialogue versus debate or discussion to help individuals explore their own social identities (i.e. gender, race, nationality, religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, etc.) and associated positions within the campus community, and then extend those understandings to better conceptualize the world around them. Through deconstruction of concepts of individual and structural power and privilege using one’s own personal narrative, salient readings/literature/media, IGD participants walk away with a powerful unique learning experience that are [sic] empowering and enhance a sense of efficacy towards social action and coalition building.”

Beginning with the autumn term, “all faculty applicants to UCLA must document their contributions to ‘equity, diversity and inclusion.’” Following the lead set by the other five participating UC schools, “existing faculty” at the Los Angeles campus would also have to “submit an ‘equity, diversity and inclusion’ statement” beginning in 2019 if they wished to be “considered” for promotion. “The mandatory statement will be credited in the same manner as the rest of the applicant’s portfolio.”
What is missing in this environment is simple trust. Creating warm and inclusive circumstances for “marginalized” students comes at the price of free and open dialogue and inquiry. It also has the ironic consequence of deepening rather than ameliorating antipathies since the individual or group is constantly on the lookout for perceived slights. A perceptive graduating high school senior recently made the point precisely, “It’s so much easier and simpler to decide someone is racist or ignorant or naive – or anti-Semitic – than to engage in the messy work of trying to communicate and understand when conflicts arise.”

Not only does the current campus atmosphere stifle free and open dialogue, it also creates a mood of perpetual self-absorption, of victimization, of hostility, and, above all, of self-righteous displacement perilously close to that experienced by Trumpites. The “minority” individual is encouraged to think in the rather romantic term of the perpetually struggling outsider, continually slighted in some way or other whom society will never ever completely accept. Graduates carry such a view into the work-a-day world to their detriment and that of friends, family and society. Finally, the well-publicized mood on campus in recent years has further alienated the nation’s conservatives, many of whom have not reached college. They see what many an aggrieved student refuses to admit, that, once achieved, a college degree “privileges” him or her (whatever their background) to membership among the nation’s elite.

The growing intolerance within campus intellectual circles began to seep into the wider community beyond. In the late summer of 2018, The New Yorker caved in to pressure and dis-invited prominent ultra-right-wing writer and former Trump adviser Steve Bannon from participating in a one-on-one on-stage conversation with editor David Remnick during the magazine’s annual Festival, “marketed…as a fantasy camp for liberals.” When Bannon’s participation was announced, numerous critics, including some invited celebrity participants, rebelled, stating that the magazine and Remnick were providing Bannon with a “megaphone” to bray his ultra-right views if not an implicit endorsement of them. Defenders of the invitation replied that the whole point of a festival of ideas “was to expose the audience to ideas. If you only invite your friends over,” staff writer Malcolm Gladwell wrote, “it’s called a dinner party.” The disinvitation stood.

Twenty months into his presidency, Donald Trump had not just divided the country; he, his policies and pronouncements had torn the nation apart. “Disputes over politics have divided Americans’ homes, strained marriages, ruined friendships and invaded the workplace. . . . changing how Americans think and behave in new and unsettling ways.” Unsurprisingly, Donald Trump was at the heart of the crisis, daily inflaming the conversation, “taunting his adversaries on Twitter. . . . quickly triggering tens of thousands of responses.” One pollster commissioning a private research survey found that “nearly a third” of respondents reported that “they had stopped talking to a friend or family member because of disagreements over policies and the 2016 election.”

By a slight margin, liberal Democrats exhibited greater intolerance than their conservative opponents.

Over a century has passed since the last Western generation truly felt a sense of general peace and security. In the seventy-five years after 1914, the world endured a series of horrific emergencies that demanded collective will, collective wisdom, and collective action to assure survival. Despite a number of miscalculations and one inexcusably brutal war, the United States led the way in meeting and defeating barbarism even as it began an anguished and lengthy confrontation with its own deeply flawed past.

We are now on the brink of fresh challenges that will demand the same kind of collective will and action it took to successfully wage world wars and stand up to the last century’s greatest tyrannies. Identity politics, however grounded it may be in real grievances, will not cure the systemic flaws in a capitalist system that condemns the lower orders, whatever their race, gender, color, creed or sexual preference to a life of hardship while the relative few at the top enjoy lives of obscene wealth and comfort. Identity politics will not solve human-induced climate change that is coming with a rush and an intensification that no one could foresee even as recently as a decade ago. Ever-shifting patterns of heat, wind and water will disrupt global economic, social and political systems with cumulative effects that threaten to degrade ways of life around the world; this country will not be immune.

Identity politics cannot rescue an international system that is unraveling in ways that are beginning to affect the everyday lives and work of people in red states as well as blue.

These formidable challenges to the domestic and global order demand a re-forging and re-affirmation of what it is not only to be an American but a human being. Technology has been rightly condemned for contributing to our present malaise: incessant wars and growing planetary pollution to name but two. But the costly “space race” of the sixties did yield an indelible image of ourselves, at once clinging to and masters of a tiny ball of brown and blue and white whirling through the dark void of eternity with little hope of ever contacting equal or higher forms of being. We are condemned to be shipmates on this tiny vessel. Dispassionate conditions will determine our future. We confront problems as old as war and peace and as new as the latest devastating hurricane or drought. Now as before, much more connects us as Harvard or Berkeley grads with the barista or the auto mechanic than
divides us. If we allow rabble rousers to maintain civil war among us, no matter how attractive or justificatory their message may seem, the future will be dim indeed.

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5 Fea, “Evangelicals Fear Elected Trump.”


xiii “UCLA Intergroup Relations Program,” online at https://www.igr.ucla.edu; Heather MacDonald, “UCLA’s Infatuation With Diversity is a Costly Diversion From its True Mission, Los Angeles Times, September 2, 2018.

xiv MacDonald, “UCLA’s Infatuation...”


xvii Jeremy W. Peters, “In a Divided Era, Political Anger is All Each Side Has in Common,” New York Times, August 20, 2018