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Claremont McKenna College

Donald Trump's Authoritarianism: The Decline of Democracy Under Trump

Submitted to

Professor John Pitney

By

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For

Senior Thesis

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Abstract

Donald Trump was the most anti-democratic president in American history. During his 2016 campaign, he encouraged violence at his rallies. He also levied harsh attacks against his opponents and even called one a “devil.” When he assumed office as president, he demanded complete loyalty and levied attacks against the press that conjured up memories of notorious autocrats. And when he lost a free and fair election in 2020, he discontinued a 200-year-old tradition and a hallmark of American democracy: the peaceful transfer of power. He also incited an insurrection when he unsuccessfully overturned the election’s results. The GOP has continued to swear their loyalty to him, and those who challenge him, like Liz Cheney, are harshly rebuked by the party. If Trump runs for president in 2024 and wins, he will continue his authoritarian tendencies from day one and have the experience to better accomplish his authoritarian goals. Even if he does not run, GOP candidates who act like him will have success — an overwhelming majority of Republicans still support Trump. Trump has thrown a wrench in American democracy, yet his influence in American politics is still enormous.

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CHAPTER 1: The Trump Administration's Authoritarianism

Donald Trump differed from all previous American presidents. He was the first to enter the White House without having held prior public office or having possessed military experience.¹ Although Trump appealed to people in part because of his outsider status,² lacking appropriate experience before assuming the highest office in the land is not a valuable asset. Republican strategist Jay Townsend said experience promotes political effectiveness: “We are used to candidates that know something about how to move the levers of power, how to build coalitions in Congress, and when they can’t do that, how to go over the heads of members of Congress and get voters to move their own congressmen ... It makes a great deal of difference.”³ Political service also educates officials about duties and limitations. Trump lacked such awareness, for he said in his 2016 acceptance speech: “I alone can fix it.”⁴ “Fixing” America requires passing laws, which requires approval from Congress; our system was designed to be a multilateral process. No reasonable person would ask a doctor to repair a broken car nor a car mechanic to examine an ill patient. People without political experience should not be tapped to lead the most powerful democracy in the world. Trump did not break America’s democracy, but he acted like an authoritarian and eroded democracy by denying the legitimacy of his opponents, inciting violence, and breaking basic democratic norms including abusing the pardon power, demanding personal loyalty, attacking the free press, and casting doubt on elections.

1.1 What is Authoritarianism

Authoritarianism is a type of political rule, the opposite of democracy. According to political scientist Juan Linz, four traits characterize authoritarian regimes. First and most important, they take a “limited, non-responsible form of pluralism.”⁵ Pluralism describes a government that accepts a multitude of beliefs, customs, and behaviors. The practice of pluralism

requires learning about those who are different “in order to overcome ignorance, stereotypes and the fears that underlie old patterns of division,” according to Richard Norman. Political pluralists do not have to agree on values and policy, but they must agree to coexist.⁶ In the United States, pluralism is strongest when multiple political parties vie fairly for power and citizens peacefully coexist and respect different races and nationalities. In authoritarian regimes, pluralism is limited when one party reduces the legitimacy of another. President Vladimir Putin of Russia showed a disdain for pluralism when he imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny. President Xi of China has shown a weak commitment by imprisoning over a million Uyghurs, an ethnic minority. Linz said pluralism is the most important out of the four criteria.⁷

Linz also said authoritarian regimes “have no elaborate ideology” but instead “display distinct mentalities.”⁸ President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, head of Egypt’s authoritarian government, epitomizes this phenomenon. “Al-Sisi presents himself as a leader on a mission,” according to Middle East scholars Bosmat Yefet and Limor Lavie.⁹ Al-Sisi said his mission is “to save the homeland from those who wanted it to fall into the clutches of collapse and destruction, trading at one time with religion and other times with freedom and democracy.”¹⁰ According to Marianne Kneuer, a mission is used a “legitimatory construct,” part of whose purpose is to bolster its image, appeal, and loyalty from citizens.¹¹

Linz said authoritarian regimes are characterized by “political apathy” of the populace. Political apathy involves low voter turnout, which can be explained in part by feelings of powerlessness. Morris Janowitz and Dwaine Marvick found in the 1960s that authoritarianism is directly related to feelings of political ineffectiveness.¹² Political apathy around the world has risen over the last few decades. From World War II to the early 1980s, around 80-85% of eligible voters in Europe voted. Since, participation has fallen below 65%. Daniele Caramani, a

comparative politics scholar at the University of Zurich, said non-voting occurs due to protest, disillusionment and feeling distant from democracy.¹³ Tom Nichols, author of *Our Own Worst Enemy*, blamed it in part on narcissism and nihilism. He said people have unjustly blamed their hardships like lost jobs or poor health on the failure of democracy. “When democracy doesn’t do everything we want it to do, we declare the whole thing a failure,” Nichols told *The Harvard Gazette*.¹⁴ In a talk delivered at Claremont McKenna College, Nichols attributed this phenomenon in part to the election of Trump. A large voter turnout in 2020 resulted in Biden’s defeat of Trump.¹⁵

Linz said authoritarian regimes are classified by political rule in which power is exercised “within formally ill-defined limits” that are “quite predictable.”¹⁶ Trump said his powers knew no limits at Turning Point U.S.A.’s Teen Student Action Summit 2019: “I have an Article II, where I have the right to do whatever I want as President.”¹⁷ This style gives autocrats “the possibility of exercising their power with greater discretion and using suppression.”¹⁸ Authoritarian regimes, for example, often use force to suppress peaceful protests.¹⁹

University of Amsterdam scholar Marlies Glasius classified authoritarianism as “sabotaging accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by disabling their access to information and/or disabling their voice.”²⁰ According to Jennifer Rubenstein, author of *Accountability in an Unequal World*, accountability fosters non-domination.²¹ Glasius said access to information is obscured when people get inaccurate information. She acknowledged that politicians often spin the truth, but behavior becomes authoritarian when politicians engage in a pattern of deliberately emitting inaccurate information. Would-be autocrats issue audacious falsehoods on a vast scale, or in the words of Steve Bannon, Trump’s former chief strategist, “flood the zone with shit.”²² Says Genna Reed of

the Union of Concerned Scientists: “The goal of disinformation, regardless of its source, is the same: to confuse the public and control the narrative for financial, political, or ideological gain.”²³

President Trump’s claim that his inauguration attracted a record attendance was a lie; his claim that millions of illegal migrants had fraudulently voted in the 2016 election was an example of a more sustained pattern: the claim aired during the election campaign, was rehashed by Trump, by his spokesman, by White House senior adviser Stephen Miller, and it was the subject of an investigation led by Vice President Mike Pence.²⁴

Glasius said “disabling voice” is another form of accountability sabotage, a phenomenon that disrupts flow from the forum to the actor, thus inhibiting the forum’s ability to “pass judgment,” a crucial aspect of accountability. Here, “critical questions may be discouraged, and questioners intimidated, penalized or bought off.” India, for example, cancelled permits for NGOs to receive foreign funding licenses, a measure aimed at disabling critical voices. Restricting freedom of expression is authoritarian because it blocks the “accountability dialogue.”²⁵

Trump did not transform the U.S. into an authoritarian regime, according to Linz’s definition. The U.S. remained pluralist: political parties still compete for power in fair elections and citizens usually protest peacefully without repercussions, for example. The U.S. still has an elaborate ideology, democracy, that guarantees citizens a multitude of freedoms. Politicians still must follow the rule of law, and checks and balances still limit power. Vicious examples of authoritarianism include denying the opposition adequate media coverage, manipulating electoral results, spying on government critics, and arresting members of the opposition and journalists.²⁶ Trump did not do any of that. He did, however, cause democratic backsliding, a term that refers

to “democratic breakdown or simply the serious weakening of existing democratic institutions.”²⁷

1.2 Democratic Backsliding

Backsliding can happen when a would-be strongman claims to be a champion of the people against real or imagined enemies, be they “elitists,” foreigners, or members of a minority ethnic group.²⁸ This authoritarian populist appeal is exactly what worried the Framers of the Constitution. In Federalist 1, Hamilton wrote:

[A]dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people than under the forbidden appearance of zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government. History will teach us that the former has been found a much more certain road to the introduction of despotism than the latter, and that of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.²⁹

Since the Cold War, backsliding has changed dramatically, shifting away from sudden or violent means. From 1960-64, there were 35 coup attempts in democracies; from the years 1970-74, 1980-84, and 1990-94, there were around 10 during each period; from 2000-04, 2005-09, and 2010-14, there were around five attempts during each period. Other, non-violent methods have largely taken their place, including promissory coups, executive aggrandizement, and manipulating elections strategically. Trump’s style was most similar to executive aggrandizement, an authoritarian pathway that is in part paved by the incumbent executive. Executive aggrandizement takes place when executives remove checks on their power, often gradually. Turkey’s transition from democracy to authoritarianism under President Recep Tayyip

Erdogan is an example. He won the presidential election in 2002 but then approved anti-democratic bills as early as 2004. One bill allowed for the criminal prosecution of journalists who discussed material deemed controversial by the government.³⁰ Trump did not get Congress to enact any such laws, but he did express a desire to “open up those libel laws” against newspapers that published unfavorable coverage of him.³¹ He also sought to block the AT&T-Time Warner merger, likely because he wanted to punish CNN, one of Time Warner’s assets.³²

1.3 Trump’s Allies’ Authoritarianism

The Trump administration leaned in the direction of authoritarianism. Bannon is a radical populist and authoritarian. He once told a reporter that he was a “Leninist,” meaning his goal was “to bring everything crashing down, and destroy all of today’s establishment.”³³ He also said: “Darkness is good. Dick Cheney. Darth Vader. Satan. That’s power.”³⁴ Bannon is an authoritarian in part because he has a violent mindset. As a young boy, Bannon liked physical altercation, according to his younger brother. According to his long-time Hollywood collaborator, Bannon “loves the idea of war.” Bannon tells audiences: “You have to have the fighting spirit of a warrior!”³⁵ During a 2014 speech, he said the U.S. is at the beginning of “a very brutal and bloody conflict” against “a new barbarity that’s starting, which will completely eradicate everything that we’ve been bequeathed over the last 2,000, 2,500 years,” unless “we” defeat it. This is “jihadist Islamic fascism.”³⁶ Bannon is also authoritarian because, as exemplified in the last quote, he demonizes outgroups, or what this paper will refer to as the “other(s).” Democracy requires toleration. Bannon compared immigration into the U.S. to events in the *Camp of the Saints*, a novel about brown and Black immigrants destroying Western civilization.³⁷ Bannon did not want his children to attend a particular Los Angeles school because it enrolled too many Jews, according to a 2007 court declaration from his ex-wife.³⁸

(Some of history's most notorious authoritarians heaped scorn on Jews or other ethnicities.)

Trump chose Bannon, according to Jeffrey Alexander, Yale University sociology professor, because "Bannon's velvet glove fits so snugly around Trump's iron fist." Alexander argues that Bannon views Trump as the protagonist, and Hillary Clinton, President Obama, and Democrats as the "dark Beast." He views Trump's anti-democratic behaviors through Bannon's influence, saying: "Trump, as made visible by Bannon, wants to convince us that universalistic discourse is outmoded and independent institutions dysfunctional."³⁹

Michael Flynn, Trump's first national security adviser, has shown a commitment to anti-democratic principles. He said a coup "should happen" in the U.S.⁴⁰ and shared a message that Trump should "suspend the Constitution," declare martial law, and have the military hold a new election.⁴¹ Like Bannon, he has demonized the other. Flynn said of Islam: it is a "vicious cancer inside the body of 1.7 billion people on this planet and it has to be excised."⁴² During Trump's transition period as president-elect, Flynn hosted the leader of the Austrian far-right Freedom Party Heinz-Christian Strache at Trump Tower. The Freedom Party was founded in the 1950s by ex-Nazis.⁴³ Daniel Serwer, a former state department official who is now a professor at Johns Hopkins University, said of the Freedom Party: "This is not just any opposition party: It is one with Nazi sympathies."⁴⁴ Strache, on protests against his party, compared them to persecution against Jews, once telling fellow partygoers, "We are the new Jews." He also said this turmoil was "like Kristallnacht."⁴⁵ Flynn has continued to endorse unconstitutional principles, recently suggesting a proposal to limit religious freedom. He told a conservative Christian audience in Texas: "If we are going to have one nation under God, which we must, we have to have one religion."⁴⁶ America was predicated on freedoms including the freedom of religion.⁴⁷

Other members of Trump’s administration showed a weak commitment to democratic principles, such as truth. Although photographs showed that Trump’s inauguration crowd size was smaller than Obama’s in 2009, Trump’s press secretary Sean Spicer declared Trump drew “the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe.”⁴⁸ Kellyanne Conway, in defense of Spicer, called his comments “alternative facts.”⁴⁹

Trump had authoritarian forces around him, but he left office with American democracy still intact — for the time being. Trump tried to overturn the legitimate results of the 2020 election — he initiated court cases, worked with a lawyer who drafted a coup plan, and implored his supporters to attack the Capitol — but he still failed to stay in power. That is a testament to the strength of the system. In the future, if Trump again becomes president, the United States might not be as lucky. Trump would have four more years to erode democracy, and he would have a better sense of how to overthrow the system.

CHAPTER 2: The Rise of Trump: Denying Legitimacy & Inciting Violence

2.1 The Rise of Trump

Prevailing attitudes helped fuel Trump's election, including widespread anti-government sentiments among Americans. A hallmark of Trump's campaign was criticizing the establishment. He frequently said he would "drain the swamp" upon assuming the presidency,⁵⁰ or in other words, root out corruption and career politicians in Washington D.C. This rallying cry appealed to Republicans because their trust in government reached its lowest point since the metric was first measured in the 1940s. More often than not during Obama's presidency, fewer than 10% of Republicans said they trusted the government "most of the time" or "just about always."⁵¹

Leading up to Trump's election, Americans' passion for democracy was declining. Over 60% of respondents born in the 1940s said it was "essential" to live in a democratic country; just over 30% of respondents born in the 1980s said the same. From 1995-2011, increasing proportions of Americans in every single age group believed a democratic political system was a "bad" or "very bad" way to "run this country." Surveys also show that young Americans have become less interested in politics and are less willing to vote.⁵²

Americans have shown an increasing interest in authoritarianism. In 1995, one in 16 respondents thought it would be "good" or "very good" for the "army to rule." As of July 2016, one in six agreed with the statement. In 1995, just under 20% of high-income respondents said it would be "good" or "very good" to have a "strong leader" who does not have to "bother with parliament and elections." By 2010, that percentage increased to just below 35. Support for authoritarianism also increased among lower- and middle-income respondents.⁵³

Trump incited fear to help him gain power, resembling some of history's autocrats. During his opening speech as presidential candidate, he painted the state of America in bleak terms: "our country is in serious trouble"; Mexico is "bringing crime; they're rapists"; "China is killing us."⁵⁴ Trump seemed keenly aware of how appealing to people's emotions, namely fear, would help him generate support. As Mark Turnbull, former managing director of Cambridge Analytica Political Global who worked for Trump's 2016 campaign, put it: "The two fundamental human drivers when it comes to taking information onboard effectively are hopes and fears and many of those are unspoken and even unconscious. It's no good fighting an election campaign on the facts because actually it's all about emotion."⁵⁵ Although Trump lost the 2020 election, part of his strategy, again, was to incite fear. During his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, he said: "No one will be safe in Biden's America."⁵⁶

Trump targeted outgroups as a vehicle to generate anxiety, a striking strategy because of its historical context. In addition to his comments about Mexicans, he called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on." Trump claimed that this proposal was intended to bolster national security,⁵⁷ but Muslim immigrants pose little threat to Americans. Muslim terrorist attacks occur primarily in their own areas of operation, foreign nations work with their Western allies to fight terrorism, and the vast majority of Muslims oppose terrorism.⁵⁸ Surveys showed that people who perceived a greater threat from Muslims were more likely to support Trump in the 2016 primaries.⁵⁹ Another leader who has drummed up support by targeting Muslims is Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Part of his strategy included polarizing communities where his party faced the most electoral competition.⁶⁰

Philosopher and psychologist Erich Fromm, in his 1941 book *Escape from Freedom*, explained why people latch onto fearmongers. He says their rhetoric arouses anxiety, which causes citizens to seek out security and latch onto authoritarianism.⁶¹

2.2 Denying Legitimacy of Opponents

Trump also rejected democratic norms by not tolerating opponents. Mutual toleration says “that as long as rivals play by constitutional rules, they accept that the other has an equal right to exist, compete for power and govern.”⁶² According to Barnard College, Columbia University political science professor Sheri Berman, mutual toleration is a “willingness to disagree.” Without it, she says, “rivals become enemies.”⁶³ This is what happened with Trump. Reflecting on House efforts to investigate his 2016 campaign’s ties to Russia and potential obstruction of justice, Trump said Democrats were trying to destroy America and were driven by “hatred, prejudice and rage.”⁶⁴ In reality, this investigation was inspired by valid suspicions. Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s report into Russian interference in the 2016 election concluded that the Russians carried out a social media campaign to improve Trump’s chances of victory and conducted “computer-intrusion operations against entities, employees, and volunteers working on the Clinton Campaign and then released stolen documents.” The report also found links between the Russian government and the Trump campaign.⁶⁵

Trump has denied the legitimacy of his opponents by casting doubt on their eligibility for office. In 2011, well before he declared his candidacy for president, Trump targeted President Obama. While appearing on ABC’s “The View” in March of that year, “Trump said: “Why doesn’t he show his birth certificate? There’s something on that birth certificate that he doesn’t like.”⁶⁶ In August 2012, even though Obama had released his birth certificate, Trump tweeted:

“An ‘extremely credible source’ has called my office and told me that @BarackObama’s birth certificate is a fraud.”⁶⁷

For years after, Trump continued to cast doubt on Obama’s birthplace. During the 2016 presidential campaign, in an interview with Wolf Blitzer, he said: “Who knows about Obama? ... Who knows, who knows? Who cares right now?... I have my own theory on Obama. Someday I will write a book, I will do another book, and it will do very successfully.”⁶⁸

Trump denied the legitimacy of other opponents. Hillary Clinton’s American roots were deeper than Trump’s, so instead of questioning her citizenship status, he suggested that she was a felon. He called her a “criminal”;⁶⁹ he frequently called her “Crooked Hilary”;⁷⁰ and he said he would arrange for a criminal investigation against her.⁷¹ He also levied harsh attacks on her, calling her “the devil”⁷² and saying that she has “tremendous hate in her heart.”⁷³ Trump rehashed the baseless claim that Ted Cruz’s father was involved in the assassination of JFK.⁷⁴ Trump, during the campaign, extended his criticism beyond political opponents. Because U.S. District Judge Gonzalo Curiel presided over civil fraud lawsuits against Trump University, Trump questioned his integrity on the basis of his Mexican heritage, calling it “an inherent conflict of interest.”⁷⁵

During his presidency, Trump continued to deny legitimacy to those who challenged him. After a federal judge blocked his executive order restricting immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries, Trump called him a “so-called judge.”⁷⁶ During the Ukraine scandal that eventually led to his first impeachment, Trump called for the impeachment of Sen. Mitt Romney for his criticism of Trump’s actions.⁷⁷ (Senators are not eligible for impeachment.)⁷⁸ Trump frequently suggested that his critics committed treason. He said Obama committed it for spying on his campaign,⁷⁹ a baseless allegation, and he suggested Rep. Adam Schiff could be

arrested for treason for mischaracterizing part of the president's phone call with the Ukrainian president that led to impeachment.⁸⁰ Trump wanted his attorney general, Bill Barr, to arrest his political rivals including Obama and Hillary Clinton for launching a "coup" against his administration,⁸¹ a baseless claim. He also called for the arrests of James Comey, whom he fired, and John Bolton, his former national security adviser who he said should be "in jail, money seized."⁸² These public statements were not merely empty rhetoric. Bolton said Trump, behind closed doors, was adamant about prosecuting John Kerry for violating the Logan Act, mentioning the idea "in meeting after meeting in the Oval."⁸³

After Oakland-born Kamala Harris became Biden's running mate, Trump entertained the notion that she was not a natural-born citizen. "I just heard it today that she doesn't meet the requirements and by the way the lawyer that wrote that piece is a very highly qualified, very talented lawyer,"⁸⁴ Trump said. The lawyer in reference is John Eastman, who would later achieve infamy as a key participant in Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 election. In a *Newsweek* essay, Eastman said Harris is not eligible to serve as vice president because her parents were not natural-born citizens. Forty legal scholars from institutions including Harvard Law School, Columbia Law School and University of Chicago Law School signed a blog post rejecting Eastman's argument as "dangerously wrong--along nearly every dimension."⁸⁵

Shortly before the 2020 presidential election, Trump made false, delegitimizing attacks on Biden. In October, Trump told reporters, without evidence, that Biden is a criminal: "He is a criminal. He's a criminal.... Let me tell you something: Joe Biden is a criminal, and he's been a criminal for a long time."⁸⁶ Biden has never been arrested. Trump also said that there would be "no God" if Biden won the election.⁸⁷ Although the Constitution forbids religious tests for office, many Americans consider atheism a disqualification and would not even vote for a well-

qualified atheist from their own party.⁸⁸ Trump said he might leave the country if Joe Biden was elected president,⁸⁹ suggesting Biden would be catastrophic for America.

Trump's labeling of his political opponents as criminals and threats to incarcerate them is authoritarian. Russia, an authoritarian country led by President Vladimir Putin, sentenced anti-Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny to 3.5 years in prison in early 2020. Amnesty International has called Navalny a "prisoner of consciousness."⁹⁰ In March 2021, Belarus, ruled by Alexander Lukashenka since 1994, announced that it had opened a criminal probe against opposition leader Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya on charges of terrorism.⁹¹ Former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak jailed one of his opponents in 2005;⁹² in 2016, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni jailed opposition leader Kizza Besigye.⁹³

Trump attacked the Democrats as a whole. At a 2019 gubernatorial campaign rally in Louisiana, Trump called the party "totalitarian" and said it was "trying to overthrow American democracy."⁹⁴ Democrat Elizabeth Warren said in a 2019 email to Uri Friedman: "Democracy is under assault in America and around the world." Around the same time, Biden said, "Donald Trump seems to be on the other team" and does not "uphold basic democratic principles."⁹⁵ At an October rally shortly before the 2020 election, Trump made another delegitimizing attack on the Democratic Party when he said, "The radical left is hell bent on destroying everything we love and cherish."⁹⁶

Trump labeled many Democrats "communist." He said Sen. Elizabeth Warren had a "communist ideology,"⁹⁷ and in an interview with Maria Bartiromo, he said then-Sen. Kamala Harris was a "communist" and a "monster."⁹⁸ In the heat of the 2020 Democratic primary, Trump also called Bernie Sanders a "communist."⁹⁹ In reality, none of these targets are actually communists. Sanders's ideology and those of other democratic socialists are based on Denmark's

style of governance,¹⁰⁰ not on the Soviet Union's communism. Labeling opponents as such is also delegitimizing because communism is fundamentally anti-American: the U.S. fought in Korea and Vietnam to stop it.

Trump casting opponents as threats to America could have similar negative consequences to Joseph McCarthy casting opponents as “communists” and “traitors.” In the early 1950s, American leaders told the public to be fearful of communists who were allegedly spread throughout society. McCarthy capitalized on this fear by opening publicized investigations into alleged communists in institutions including the State Department, White House and Treasury. As a result, “No one dared tangle with McCarthy for fear of being labeled disloyal.”¹⁰¹ This political strategy restricts freedom. It produces an atmosphere of suspicion and fear that “limits freedom of speech and thought by its emphasis on what happens to those who disagree with the majority belief, or with those currently in power.”¹⁰² This is precisely the dynamic between Trump and fellow politicians, especially Republicans. Those who speak out against him risk their political careers. As a result of this phenomenon, an overwhelming majority of Republicans have bowed down to the president. Ted Cruz, who once called Trump a “pathological liar,”¹⁰³ a “sniveling coward,”¹⁰⁴ and “utterly amoral”¹⁰⁵ has ended up being one of his most loyal allies; he even served as a legal strategist for him during his first impeachment trial.¹⁰⁶ Trump, who called Cruz a “liar” and a “nasty guy”¹⁰⁷ during the 2016 campaign, ended up praising Cruz after he began to support him: “To me, he’s not Lyin’ Ted anymore; he’s beautiful Ted,” Trump said in 2018.¹⁰⁸

This dynamic also played out between Trump and Sen. Lindsey Graham. Graham, during the 2016 campaign, called Trump a “race-baiting, xenophobic, religious bigot.”¹⁰⁹ When Trump assumed office, Graham became one of the president’s closest allies.¹¹⁰

One of the few politicians who broke with Trump could now lose her political career.¹¹¹ For voting to impeach Trump during his second impeachment trial, Trump called Rep. Liz Cheney a “bitter, horrible human being.”¹¹² Republicans voted to remove her from her position as the No. 3 House Republican in May 2021, likely ending her rise up the party.¹¹³ Trump endorsed Cheney’s 2022 primary opponent Harriet Hageman.¹¹⁴ Other Republicans including Rep. Matt Gaetz have attacked Cheney. Gaetz campaigned against her in her home state of Wyoming.¹¹⁵ Attacks on Cheney appear related solely to her view of Trump. Her fellow Republicans do not attack her “conservative credentials,”¹¹⁶ and she voted with Trump nearly 93% of the time.¹¹⁷

Recent past presidents sharply criticized opponents but did not make delegitimizing attacks. Obama, during the 2020 campaign, poked fun at Trump for his concern with his inauguration crowd size. Obama also criticized Trump for the “pandemic he ignored,” bullying people, and bragging.¹¹⁸ Obama, however, never said he would leave the country if Trump won re-election nor that Trump hates America and was seeking to destroy it, even though one could make that case based in part on him being the only twice-impeached president.

Whereas Trump called his opponents criminals, some presidential candidates have defended their opponents. During the 2008 campaign, John McCain on multiple occasions stood up for President Obama against delegitimizing attacks. When one supporter expressed fear about Obama becoming president, McCain responded, “He is a decent person and a person that you do not have to be scared as president of the United States.” After a different supporter called him an “Arab,” McCain took the microphone from her, saying: “No, ma’am. He’s a decent family man and citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that’s what this campaign is all about.”¹¹⁹ Four years later, during the Obama-Romney campaign, Obama,

unprompted, complimented his opponent for his efforts at health care reform, Wall Street regulation and the bailout of the auto industry.¹²⁰ The president also, during a speech, pushed back against supporters who booed his opponent: “No, Mr. Romney is a patriotic American. He’s got a beautiful family. He’s been very successful in his life.”¹²¹

2.3 Trump’s Preference for Domination

Trump had a fetish for strength and power. Trump’s former top national security adviser Fiona Hill told *The Daily Beast*: “He saw Putin as the kind of epitome of the badass populist, frankly, you know, the kind of person that he wanted to be: super-rich, super powerful, no checks and balances, and essentially being able to stay in power forever.”¹²² Of North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un, Trump said: “He speaks, and his people sit up at attention,” Trump told Fox News in a 2018 interview. “I want my people to do the same.”¹²³ Trump, while in the hospital with COVID, tweeted, “I feel better than I did 20 years ago!”¹²⁴ Trump’s value of strength came despite his own weakness. He received a medical exemption from serving in the military during the Vietnam War for bone spurs in his heels. The podiatrist who made the diagnosis did it as a favor for Trump’s father, Fred Trump.¹²⁵

Authoritarians like Zimbabwe’s former dictator Robert Mugabe promote violence against opponents. During a 2016 protest in Zimbabwe’s capital Harare, a 39-year-old man named Jonathan Malindati was beaten by police for protesting against the government: “I was beaten by the police here exercising my constitutional right ... “(Police) must not be sent to fight us by Mugabe.”¹²⁶

Trump’s toleration and encouragement of violence resembles that of authoritarians like Mugabe. While on the campaign trail in 2016, he made multiple statements promoting violence. On Feb. 1, 2016, he told rally-goers, “If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato,

knock the crap out of them ... I will pay for the legal fees.” At another rally later in the month, he said of a protester: “I’d like to punch him in the face.”¹²⁷ He also suggested that supporters could commit violence against Hilary Clinton if she won the presidency and was able to nominate Supreme Court justices: “If she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks ... Although the Second Amendment people--maybe there is, I don’t know.”¹²⁸

Trump has commended authoritarians for their shows of strength. Reflecting on the Tiananmen Square massacre that killed 200 people, Trump complimented the Chinese government’s ability to put down the protests: “They were vicious, they were horrible, but they put it down with strength. That shows you the power of strength. Our country is right now perceived as weak.”¹²⁹ When Fox News reporter Bret Baier told Trump that North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un was killing people, Trump came to Kim’s defense: “He’s a tough guy,” Trump responded. Trump also spoke of his admiration for Kim’s takeover of North Korea from his father at age 27: “If you can do that at 27 years old, I mean that’s one in 10,000 that could do that. So he’s a very smart guy.”¹³⁰ Trump has also complimented President Xi Jinping of China, a leader who has supported the incarceration of more than 1 million Uyghurs based on their ethnic status.¹³¹ Of Xi, Trump tweeted in 2019, “He is a great leader who very much has the respect of his people,” Trump wrote. “He is also a good man in a ‘tough business.’”¹³²

Sources who were once close to the president show that he explicitly admired and sought to emulate authoritarian strength. Trump told aides that he liked Turkish President Recep Erdogan’s strongman-style and “Darth Vader-like baritone voice.”¹³³ During August 2020 protests in Portland, Trump wanted to send in the military to deliver a “message of power” even though then-Attorney General Bill Barr did not find it necessary.¹³⁴

Trump displayed his preference for strength and domination in summer 2020. During protests against the murder of George Floyd, the president responded to unruly protests in a tweet: “When the looting starts, the shooting starts.” (That phrase dates back to the civil rights era where it was used by a white police chief who was bigoted against the Black community.)¹³⁵ Since Trump’s tweet glorified violence, Twitter censored it.¹³⁶ Trump tried to walk back the tweet, saying it was a fact that people would be shot if looting continued.¹³⁷ One can contest that claim by pointing to his threat to bring in the military. Trump recommended that mayors and governors “dominate the streets.” He also said: “If a city or state refuses to take the actions that are necessary to defend the life and property of their residents, then I will deploy the United States military and quickly solve the problem for them.”¹³⁸ In response to Trump’s threats, some U.S. politicians raised concerns about its dictatorial tone. “The fascist speech Donald Trump just delivered verged on a declaration of war against American citizens,” Sen. Ron Wyden, Democrat of Oregon, tweeted.¹³⁹ Then-Sen. Kamala Harris tweeted that Trump’s speech featured “the words of a dictator.”¹⁴⁰ Trump’s rhetoric of domination aligns with the actions of dictators who forcibly suppress dissent by rolling in the military. Iran security forces killed hundreds of people protesting gas price hikes in 2019.¹⁴¹ In Belarus, protesters have been killed for demonstrating against a seemingly fraudulent election.¹⁴²

Trump has also refused to condemn QAnon, an FBI-declared domestic terrorist threat. QAnon is a digital-based conspiracy theory proposing that Donald Trump is trying to save the world from a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles. Several acts of violence have been linked to adherence to QAnon. In 2018, Matthew Philip Wright drove an armored truck onto a bridge, blocked traffic, then stood on the road holding a sign calling for the release of the “OIG Report.” QAnon supporters believed that this report would contain revelations about nefarious

government officials. Wright was arrested with two assault-style rifles and 900 rounds of ammunition in his vehicle. After the arrest, he wrote a letter to Trump containing the QAnon references “Great Awakening” and “For Where We Go One, We Go All.” Wright ultimately pled guilty to making a terrorist threat.¹⁴³ When Trump was asked about the QAnon movement, he offered words of praise: “I’ve heard these are people that love our country.”¹⁴⁴ The U.S. Department of Homeland Security formally acknowledged the threat from domestic violent extremists in an October 2020 report.¹⁴⁵ Some domestic violent extremists have been tied to QAnon.¹⁴⁶ Donald Trump is not responsible for acts of violence carried out in the name of QAnon. He has, however, failed to condemn this conspiracy theory. His refusal to condemn QAnon could lead to more preventable acts of violence.

CHAPTER 3: Rejecting Democratic Norms

3.1 Suggesting Delaying Elections

Like authoritarians, Trump rejected democratic norms. He suggested postponing the 2020 election in a tweet: “With Universal Mail-In Voting (not Absentee Voting, which is good), 2020 will be the most INACCURATE & FRAUDULENT Election in history,” he wrote. “It will be a great embarrassment to the USA. Delay the Election until people can properly, securely and safely vote???”¹⁴⁷ Delaying elections is an act of authoritarianism. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the electoral commission president claimed the country had to delay the voting because it lacked financial resources and would not be able to conclude its update of the voter registry. Former President Joseph Kabila ultimately exceeded his term by over two years. Delaying the election led to protests, resulting in dozens of deaths at the hands of security forces.¹⁴⁸ Former president of Chad Idriss Deby delayed an election by multiple years, also claiming financial difficulties. Deby’s claim was contested by the opposition.¹⁴⁹ Delaying elections can be appropriate when the decision is made by an “independent election body concerned about legitimate security or logistical challenges.”¹⁵⁰ In Trump’s case, the idea was floated by a singular figure on the basis of an illegitimate claim that mail-in voting promotes widespread fraud. In reality, mail-in voting is reliable for a multitude of reasons, one being mail-in ballots are only sent to eligible voters.¹⁵¹

Trump also would not have had the power to delay the election unilaterally. Congress sets the dates for elections as ordained in the Constitution.¹⁵² All Republicans who opined on the issue rejected his suggestion to postpone the election. “He can suggest whatever he wants. The law is what it is,” Sen. Marco Rubio told reporters a few months before the 2020 election. “We’re going to have an election that’s legitimate, it’s going to be credible, it’s going to be the

same as we've always done it.”¹⁵³ Sen. Chuck Grassley dismissed Trump's suggestion, too. “It doesn't matter what one individual in this country says,” Grassley said. “We must follow the law until either the Constitution is changed or until the law is changed.”¹⁵⁴

3.2 Abusing the Pardon Power

Trump abused the pardon power, which allows the president to grant reprieve for all “offences against the United States,” except cases of impeachment.¹⁵⁵ The Framers established the pardon power to enable the executive to promote justice and national security. Trump pardoned 143 individuals at the end of his presidency, some of whom were friends, aides, high-profile supporters, his “daughter's father-in-law, corrupt politicians, and even individuals who have caught his attention because of some snippet of TV coverage that caught fire on social media among his base.”¹⁵⁶ Among the pardoned included Elliott Broidy, a leading fundraiser for Trump's 2016 campaign who pleaded guilty to conspiring to violate foreign lobbying laws,¹⁵⁷ and Paul Manafort who passed confidential campaign information to a Russian intelligence agent.¹⁵⁸ Trump also pardoned other associates who committed malfeasance as part of the investigation into his campaign's ties to Russia, including Roger Stone, George Papadopoulos, Alex van der Zwaan and Michael T. Flynn.¹⁵⁹

Roger Stone said Trump should grant him a pardon to save him from the “corrupt courts.”¹⁶⁰ The president validated Stone's claim by granting him clemency, leading more Americans to believe that their courts are in fact corrupt. When Americans believe that fairly-convicted criminals are innocent, they risk electing immoral people to high office.

3.3 Demanding Loyalty

Trump dismissed those who were not in lockstep with him. This was apparent during the Russia investigation. In May 2017, Trump fired FBI Director James Comey who was

spearheading an investigation into whether his 2016 campaign had colluded with the Russian government.¹⁶¹ The president seemed to admit that his decision to fire Comey was related to his investigation, telling NBC's Lester Holt: "And in fact when I decided to just do it, I said to myself, I said 'you know, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made-up story, it's an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election that they should have won.'"¹⁶² Republican Sen. Jeff Flake found the firing unacceptable, tweeting: "I've spent the last several hours trying to find an acceptable rationale for the timing of Comey's firing. I just can't do it."¹⁶³ Ziblatt and Levitsky wrote that Trump sought leaders for U.S. intelligence agencies who would be loyal to him, "apparently in the hope of using these agencies as a shield against investigations into his campaign's Russia ties."¹⁶⁴

Trump also forced Attorney General Jeff Sessions to resign for what seemed like his lack of loyalty. Sessions recused himself from the investigation due to pressure over his communications with Moscow's U.S. envoy during the 2016 campaign.¹⁶⁵ Even though a bipartisan group of congresspeople from both chambers and career Justice Department officials supported his recusal, Trump "erupted" at Sessions because of it. He also asked White House officials: "Where's my Roy Cohn?" He was referring to his former personal lawyer and loyalist.¹⁶⁶

Trump fired government officials who provided unfavorable testimonies during his first impeachment trial. Gordon D. Sondland, who donated \$1 million to Trump's inaugural committee, was recalled from his post as ambassador to the United Nations. On the same day, fellow witness Lt. Col. Alexander S. Vindman, a decorated Iraq war veteran on the National Security Council staff, was escorted out of the White House by security guards.¹⁶⁷ The chances are extremely slim that their firings coincidentally occurred on the same day. David Pressman,

Colonel Vindman's lawyer, said in a statement, "Lt. Col. Vindman was asked to leave for telling the truth. His honor, his commitment to right, frightened the powerful."¹⁶⁸

Trump fired Christopher Krebs, leader of CISA, for telling the truth about the 2020 election. In the wake of Trump's rigged election claims, Krebs said the 2020 election was the most secure of all time. Trump fired him as a result, saying his claims were "highly inaccurate."¹⁶⁹ Krebs had no incentive to lie: he was appointed by Trump and left a comfortable job at Microsoft to serve the public. He simply "wanted to help" combat Russian interference.¹⁷⁰

Brookings senior fellow Kathryn Dunn Tenpas noted unusually high turnover during Trump's first year. According to Tenpas, Trump's high turnover rate is especially noteworthy because it might be indicative of his prioritization of loyalty over qualifications. "Since the president relied on many of his connections in the private sector and was reluctant to hire those who opposed him during the campaign, the absence of prior White House experience among the ranks of the senior staff was glaring," she noted.¹⁷¹ His turnover rate might have also been so high because he dismissed those who were not in lockstep with him.

By Trump's final year, he was actively purging people for not acceding to his demands. Trump fired secretary of defense Mark Esper after the pair had long been at odds. Esper's declaration that there were no legal grounds to deploy active-duty troops to U.S. streets during the height of the Black Lives Matter protests irked the president.¹⁷² Bill Barr resigned from his post as AG, but Trump was planning on firing him regardless for his refusal to claim that the 2020 election was littered with fraud.¹⁷³

In the final months of Trump's administration, all remaining officials acceded to Trump's preferences. The Presidential Personnel Office, responsible for hiring and firing political appointees in the executive branch, served as an "internal police force," monitoring officials for

any signs of dissent and purging those who were not sufficiently loyal. Some PPO members compared the office to the East German Stasi or even the Gestapo.¹⁷⁴

3.4 Disregard for Term Limits

Trump also suggested negotiating a third term because of unfair treatment.¹⁷⁵ Authoritarians often extend their tenures beyond what was established when they assumed office. Xi Jinping abolished term limits in 2018. In 2020, Russians “approved” a referendum to enable Putin to serve additional terms past what the Russian Constitution had allowed. The vote was criticized for being rigged.¹⁷⁶ America’s democracy would have weakened had Trump served longer than two terms. Long-serving leaders are more likely to develop cults of personality, stifling political competition and turning people away from pursuing politics. Long-serving leaders also push competent officeholders out of office or cause them to leave voluntarily, paving the way for sycophantic allies of the leader. The risk of violence grows as citizens come to believe that change cannot happen through voting. Regular, established transfers of power encourage political participation. It also demonstrates that change is possible through voting, thus discouraging coups and other unconstitutional efforts to seize power.¹⁷⁷

3.5 Attacking the Press

It is common for presidents to spar with the press. When Major Garrett suggested that Obama was content with Americans remaining imprisoned in Iran, the president responded firmly: “Major, that’s nonsense, and you should know better.”¹⁷⁸ The Obama administration also prosecuted 10 government employees for leaking classified information to the press and came under immense criticism from reporters for being secretive.¹⁷⁹ Recently, Joe Biden lost his temper with Kaitlan Collins of CNN, suggesting she might be “in the wrong business” as a

reporter. He later apologized to her and said he should not have been such a “wise guy.” Collins did not find his apology necessary but still appreciated the gesture.¹⁸⁰

Trump has transcended typical president-press tensions by delegitimizing the press and by levying vicious attacks. Ilya Somin, a law professor from George Mason University, explained how Trump deviated from other presidents: “A president has every right to criticize the media, and almost all presidents do on occasion,” he said. “But Trump’s comments ... often verge on trying to delegitimize the media as an institution. That’s a bad thing.”¹⁸¹ Trump labeled the press “fake news” more than 1,500 times during his presidency.¹⁸² He called certain outlets and media members: “dishonest,” “lying,” “disgusting,”¹⁸³ “horrible,” and “scum.”¹⁸⁴ Reporter Abby Phillip of CNN once asked him a question that he did not like, to which he responded: “What a stupid question that is. What a stupid question. But I watch you a lot ... you ask a lot of stupid questions.”¹⁸⁵ Jim Acosta was also meanly attacked by the president for challenging him on his claim that a group of immigrants approaching the border were mounting an “invasion.” The president called Acosta a “rude, terrible person” who “shouldn’t be working for CNN.”¹⁸⁶

Trump popularized the term “fake news,”¹⁸⁷ resulting in negative implications globally. Prior to his tenure in office, this term was not widely used,¹⁸⁸ but a report released in 2018 found that within a year, more than 20 political leaders globally, from both authoritarian and democratic governments, used the term “fake news” to discredit journalism.¹⁸⁹ One of Trump’s former White House communications directors, Michel Dubke, admitted the negative global implications of Trump’s rhetoric: “What concerns me is that authoritarian leaders who had already placed restrictions on their press are using President Trump’s words to justify what they are doing.”¹⁹⁰ Between January 2017 and May 2019, 26 countries justified their enactments or

introductions of laws or rules restricting online media and journalistic access by saying they would prevent “fake news.”¹⁹¹

Calling the press “fake news” weakens an essential check on political power: “The labelling of prestigious media as ‘fake news’ outlets by those who are the major emitters of fake news is part of a determined attack against the system of checks and balances which define and protect liberal democracy,” Jean-Paul Mathoz, author, academic and veteran journalist, said.¹⁹² John McCain discussed how a free press helps prevent authoritarianism: “If you want to preserve democracy as we know it, you have to have a free and, many times, adversarial press,” McCain added. “And without it, I am afraid that we would lose so much of our individual liberties over time. That’s how dictators get started.” He said a free press was central to a functioning democracy even if their coverage challenged those in power.¹⁹³ Trump told journalist Lesley Stahl that he attacked the press because he did not want people to believe negative stories about him.¹⁹⁴ One of his tweets seems to confirm this notion: “The Fake News is working overtime. Just reported that, despite the tremendous success we are having with the economy & all things else, 91% of the Network News about me is negative (fake).”¹⁹⁵ Here, the president admits that his classification of fake is synonymous to unfavorable.

The president wanted control over information, a classic trait of authoritarians. Whereas some authoritarians have the power to ban media outlets,¹⁹⁶ Trump, lacking such power, used his words instead to turn people away from truthful stories. His lies had negative ramifications for democracy. “Without credible information about what our elected leaders do, we cannot effectively exercise our right to vote.”¹⁹⁷

Trump’s attacks on the media had dangerous consequences. Ashley Vanderbilt, believing that the mainstream media was fake, became a QAnon follower and believer that Trump could

do no wrong. She ended up devoting more time to cultish groups than to attending church, and as she became more stressed out, she got “hateful toward” her 4-year-old daughter. When Biden was sworn into office, she went into “panic mode” and believed people would die as a result.¹⁹⁸ Her loss of touch with reality can be attributed to Trump’s attacks on the press. When people passively accept everything a leader says, the leader can get away with saying whatever is in his best interest.

Trump’s claim that the press is “the enemy of the people”¹⁹⁹ resembled attacks levied by some of history’s most abhorrent dictators who classified their opponents as enemies of the people, especially the press. “Their goal was to delegitimize the work of the press as ‘fake news’ and create confusion in the public mind about what’s real and what isn’t; what can be trusted and what can’t be,” Marvin Kalb, author of “Enemy of the People,” said.²⁰⁰ Part of a speech delivered by former Republican Sen. Jeff Flake also shows just how far the president was willing to go to discredit the media. “It bears noting that so fraught with malice was the phrase ‘enemy of the people,’ that even Nikita Khrushchev forbade its use, telling the Soviet Communist Party that the phrase had been introduced by Stalin for the purpose of ‘annihilating such individuals’ who disagreed with the supreme leader.”²⁰¹

The president took anti-democratic actions against the press. In February 2017, the Trump administration selectively prevented outlets including BBC, CNN, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times* and POLITICO from attending an off-camera gaggle in press secretary Sean Spicer’s office.²⁰² Previous administrations would sometimes host small gaggles with “expanded pools,” but the Trump administration’s decision to selectively include conservative outlets was unprecedented, according to POLITICO. Executive director of *The Washington Post* Marty Baron accused the administration of traveling down an undemocratic path.²⁰³ CNN

Communications suggested its exclusion was an attempt to censor the truth. It tweeted: “Apparently this is how they retaliate when you report facts they don’t like.”²⁰⁴ Although Sean Spicer denied excluding CNN and *The New York Times* on the basis of their coverage, his claim is questionable; the president railed against both organizations leading up to the incident. In January, Trump called CNN “fake news”²⁰⁵ and tweeted that the NYT was “fake news.”²⁰⁶ One of Spicer’s comments from the gaggle also suggests that exclusions were made based on publications’ content. He said, “We’re going to aggressively push back” and “not going to sit back and let, you know, false narratives, false stories, inaccurate facts get out there.”²⁰⁷ The president’s exclusions were arguably unconstitutional. “If you exclude reporters from briefings that they otherwise have a right to attend because you don’t like their reporting, then you have engaged in viewpoint discrimination,” Jameel Jaffer, director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, said.²⁰⁸ Viewpoint discrimination by the government on the basis of content is unconstitutional.²⁰⁹

After Trump and Acosta’s argument over the immigrant caravan, the White House suspended CNN reporter Jim Acosta’s credentials. It claimed, falsely, that Acosta had “placed his hands” on an intern who attempted to grab the microphone out of his hand. The administration had press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders tweet a doctored video of this interaction on Twitter. CNN sued Trump and administration officials, alleging their revocation violated Acosta’s First and Fifth Amendment rights. Judge Timothy Kelly found that the White House likely violated Acosta’s Fifth Amendment rights, and the White House soon restored Acosta’s pass.²¹⁰

In 2019, the White House also suspended the press passes of many more journalists, establishing standards that disqualified “almost the entire White House press corps.” The new

rule declared that journalists had to be present for 90 days out of a 180-day period to retain their passes. This modification prevented all White House correspondents of *The Washington Post* from entering the White House. The administration took this step despite objections from news organizations and the White House Correspondents' Association.²¹¹ In response to this story, Sen. Patrick Leahy tweeted: "This is what dictators do."²¹² It ultimately reinstated the passes for all of The Post's correspondents, but it excluded The Post's Dana Milbank for what he believed was his criticism of Trump.²¹³

The Trump administration also showed a lack of transparency by going long periods without hosting press briefings, at the request of Trump himself.²¹⁴ They became infrequent in 2018 and stopped in 2019. Not once did Stephanie Grisham host a press briefing during her roughly nine-months long tenure as press secretary. When Grisham commented that she made up for a lack of briefings by talking to nearly a hundred reporters daily, former president of the White House Correspondents Association Jonathan Karl told the Committee to Protect Journalists that was not true and that "not a lot of information flows out of the press office compared to other administrations."²¹⁵

During the 2016 campaign, Trump made a troubling suggestion that he was going to target Amazon for its purchase of *The Washington Post*: "If I become president, oh do they have problems. They're gonna have such problems."²¹⁶ The president may have been suggesting that he would work to censor the Post or make it harder for them to publish critical coverage. There is no way to know if his threats were serious, but his rhetoric signaled to supporters that a legitimate newspaper deserved retribution. The president attempted to hamper Amazon by pressuring Postmaster General Megan Brennan to double the rate that the Postal Service charged Amazon.²¹⁷

The president once tweeted a mock video of himself punching an individual with the CNN logo superimposed on his face.²¹⁸ The video was retweeted more than 340,000 times,²¹⁹ so it likely reached more than a million people. This video promoted violence against the press and might have signaled to supporters to harm its members.

Trump supporters might have been influenced by such attacks to carry out violence. At a 2019 Trump rally in Texas, one Trump supporter shoved a media member, then shouted, “F--k the media!”²²⁰ One supporter punched equipment out of a journalist’s hand²²¹ and one smacked a reporter outside of an Orlando Trump rally.²²² Jim Acosta, a main target of the president, received death threats frequently, and CNN hired security guards to protect him when attending Trump rallies, according to testimony from his book “The Enemy of the People.”²²³ Cesar Sayoc, a fervent supporter of Trump, mailed pipe bombs to CNN and to Democrats who he considered Trump’s enemies.²²⁴ Targets included Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Kamala Harris and Barack Obama.²²⁵ During the Jan. 6 insurrection, Trump supporters spat and threw objects toward media personnel and destroyed their equipment.²²⁶ POLITICO reporter Anita Kumar told the CPJ in April 2020 that since 2016, even though she was never singled out by Trump, she felt more animosity than ever before.²²⁷

3.6 Weak Commitment to Electoral Process

Trump showed a tendency to delegitimize unfavorable outcomes even before his political career. When his television show “The Apprentice” failed to win Emmy awards, the president blamed the losses on politics.²²⁸ In response to a lawsuit brought against Trump University, a defunct real estate training program owned by Trump, the president called the judge’s court a “rigged system” and claimed the judge was biased against him.²²⁹ Trump ultimately reached a \$25 million settlement with students who were defrauded.²³⁰ Since before Trump declared his

candidacy for president in 2016, he has cast doubt on the integrity of American elections. When television networks called the 2012 presidential election for Obama, Trump suggested the results were illegitimate, tweeting: “He (Obama) lost the popular vote by a lot and won the election. We should have a revolution in this country!”²³¹ He also tweeted, “This election is a total sham and a travesty. We are not a democracy!”²³² Shortly after the FBI recommended against an indictment of Hillary Clinton for her sending of classified emails from a private email server, Trump called the decision “rigged.”²³³

Trump cast doubt on elections in 2016. Shortly after Ted Cruz won the 2016 Iowa caucuses, Trump tweeted: “Ted Cruz didn’t win Iowa, he stole it.”²³⁴ When asked at a 2016 presidential debate if he would accept the results of the election, he refused to answer: “I will look at it at the time.”²³⁵ Even after winning the 2016 election, Trump falsely claimed that he would have won the popular vote were it not for the millions of people who voted illegally.²³⁶ Leading up to the 2020 election, Trump claimed the election would be illegitimate: “This is going to be a fraud like you’ve never seen.”²³⁷ Trump, likely anticipating a loss, also delegitimized the 2020 election on election night. “This is a fraud on the American public,”²³⁸ he said. Following announcements that Biden won, Trump ramped up his claims of a “rigged”²³⁹ election against him. He said, without evidence, that he won a “landslide victory”²⁴⁰ even though he was told by Stepien that it would take some time for the results to be conclusive.²⁴¹

Trump’s claim on election night that the election was fraudulent was baseless. Such a claim requires ample evidence, and the Trump administration did not have enough time that evening to mount a legitimate case. The president also did not spend that evening investigating fraud. He spent it “glued to the television” watching results,²⁴² being told by his allies to remain calm,²⁴³ and speaking to political friends including Sen. Graham.²⁴⁴

Trump's false claim that he won a landslide victory is precisely what Belarusian dictator Lukashenka did. In 2020, Lukashenka declared a landslide victory that observers declared fraudulent.²⁴⁵

Trump's declaration of victory mirrors actions of authoritarians including Mugabe, Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela and Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia. In 2013, despite many nations expressing concern about Mugabe's declared victory, including the U.S. State Department, who said the results did not "represent a credible expression of the will of the Zimbabwean people,"²⁴⁶ Mugabe's government declared that he defeated his top challenger by 27 percentage points.²⁴⁷ Maduro also claimed victory over his top challenger by more than 45 percentage points amidst hyperinflation and a humanitarian crisis.²⁴⁸ The U.S. Mission to the United Nations tweeted that the election was "an insult to democracy."²⁴⁹ In the 90s, Milosevic claimed victory, although voter suppression was widespread: those who had not participated in previous elections were purged from voting rolls and five to 10 percent of voters were turned away by state authorities on election day.²⁵⁰

Trump broke a democratic norm when he tried to stop the transfer of power. Every presidential candidate in U.S. history who lost their election, starting with John Adams more than 220 years ago, has willingly and peacefully (if sometimes grudgingly) surrendered power to the winner, regardless of any conflict with their opponent.²⁵¹ In 2008, McCain conceded on election night: "A little while ago, I had the honor of calling Senator Barack Obama to congratulate him on being elected the next president," he said, imploring his supporters to stop booing.²⁵² Mitt Romney also called Obama on election night in 2012.²⁵³ In 2016, Hillary Clinton called Trump.²⁵⁴ Political theorist and historian Paul Corcoran wrote a paper on presidential concession speeches. He found concessions to be "formulaic." Many started with the speaker

announcing that he or she had called the winner to congratulate them. Then, oftentimes, the speaker called for unity and encouraged supporters to accept the result.²⁵⁵ Trump offered nothing even remotely similar. On election night, he said he would initiate court cases to challenge the results, calling them fraudulent.²⁵⁶ In the ensuing weeks, he initiated at least 62 lawsuits attempting to overturn the results in states he lost;²⁵⁷ pressured the top two officials at the Justice Department to “just say that the election was corrupt”;²⁵⁸ and pressured Georgia’s secretary of state Brad Raffensperger to “find” votes to overturn Biden’s victory in the state of Georgia.²⁵⁹ (Raffensperger wrote in a book that he found the demand threatening.)²⁶⁰ Trump also incited an insurrection.²⁶¹

Trump’s allies also worked on his behalf to overturn the results. John Eastman, one of his lawyers, crafted an illegal plan to keep him in office. The plan was intended for Mike Pence to put into motion during the Jan. 6 joint session of Congress meeting to certify the electoral votes. It instructed Pence to say he received multiple slates of electors from the seven states in which there were “ongoing disputes.” The plan told Pence to announce that he could not certify the results from those states because of the multiple slates.²⁶² (The problem is that Pence did not have multiple slates of electors from any of the states; each state only certified one slate of electors.)²⁶³ Eastman, however, in the following step instructed Pence to announce that he could not accept and certify the electors from either of the two slates for the seven “ongoing disputes” states. With those seven states excluded from the count, Trump would have more electoral votes than Biden, thus being re-elected.²⁶⁴ Harvard Law professor Laurence Tribe called the plan “jaw-droppingly stupid.” Eastman’s plan also encouraged Pence to violate the Constitution. “The vice president has no power whatsoever in deciding which votes count,” Tribe told *Newsweek*. “From the beginning of the republic, the Constitution’s history has made clear that the vice president’s

role in this special quadrennial joint session is purely ceremonial. He doesn't have to even truly count the votes. He simply announces the vote count and in announcing it, he has no discretion whatsoever."²⁶⁵

Mark Meadows, Trump's chief of staff, asked Jeffrey Rosen, then the acting attorney general, to investigate debunked claims of election fraud in New Mexico and other conspiracy theories. One of the conspiracy theories purported that people in Italy used technology to switch votes from Trump to Biden. "The communications between Mr. Meadows and Mr. Rosen ... show the increasingly urgent efforts by Mr. Trump and his allies during his last days in office to find some way to undermine, or even nullify, the election results while he still had control of the government," Katie Benner of the NYT wrote.²⁶⁶

Trump's claim that the election was stolen will have international implications. It will "create a new model" for like-minded populists in Europe and elsewhere, according to Ivan Krastev, an expert on East and Central Europe at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. "Now, they won't trust democracy, and will do everything and anything to stay in power."²⁶⁷

Government agencies and officials refuted Trump's claim that the 2020 election was fraudulent. The president on 12 November 2020 tweeted: "DOMINION DELETED 2.7 MILLION TRUMP VOTES NATIONWIDE."²⁶⁸ As noted earlier, the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency released a statement some hours later that read in part: "The November 3rd election was the most secure in American history."²⁶⁹ A main talking point purporting fraud said Dominion voting machines had switched votes for Trump to Biden. The CISA report also said: "There is no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised."²⁷⁰ In an op-ed published by *The Washington Post*, Krebs said paper records were generated for all computer-based votes

in Georgia, Michigan, Arizona, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, providing a paper trail to confirm voting machine accuracy. In Georgia, paper records confirmed the accuracy of electronic voting machines, proving that machines did not manipulate votes.²⁷¹ Shortly after the election, *The New York Times* conducted their own investigation into voter fraud and found no major issues. The Times contacted top election officials from all 50 states; 45 responded directly to The Times, saying there were no major issues. For four other states, The Times talked to other statewide officials and found public statements from secretaries of state, finding no issues there, either.²⁷² Barr found no evidence of fraud, telling the Associated Press in an interview, “We have not seen fraud on a scale that could have effected a different outcome in the election.”²⁷³

Scholars from Stanford University and the University of Chicago also debunked some of the most common arguments supporting the Big Lie.²⁷⁴ The claim that Biden could not have won more votes because Trump won vastly more counties is refuted by the fact that Biden’s support was concentrated in more populous counties. Most of the counties Trump carried were rural and less populated. Some critics of the election results also baselessly say Dominion voting machines deliberately switched votes from Trump to Biden. Through a bivariate regression, the scholars found “the same null effect of Dominion voting machines.” John Lott, Ph. D. purported that election results were fraudulent because turnout was unusually high in counties where Republicans alleged fraud. The researchers challenged his claim: “Turnout varies across counties for many reasons, and it is unreasonable to ascribe a small unexplained difference to fraud,” they wrote.²⁷⁵ Fraud did not contribute to Trump’s loss: his unpopularity did. He was the first president in modern history never to reach an approval rating of 50%, and his average approval rating of 41% was four points lower than any of his predecessors in Gallup’s polling era.²⁷⁶

CHAPTER 4: Trump’s Insurrection, and What’s Next?

4.1 Trump’s Insurrection

Trump inspired an insurrection on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2020. He claimed his 2020 election loss was rigged and said his supporters must come to Washington D.C. to stop the election from being stolen. During his speech to supporters on Jan. 6, Trump said: “If you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.”²⁷⁷ He also used the word “fight” or “fighting” 20 separate times.²⁷⁸ Trump’s defenders’ efforts to minimize his inflammatory rhetoric have been weak. In Trump’s impeachment trial, his lawyers compiled a video showing mostly Democratic lawmakers using passionate rhetoric including the word “fight.”²⁷⁹ Comparing their uses of “fight” to the president’s was a false equivalency. Many uses of “fight” in the video were figurative expressions or calls to passionately advocate for issues, and almost all were taken out of context. Included in the video is a snippet of Sen. Chuck Schumer who says “fighting the health crisis of COVID.”²⁸⁰ Schumer was not advocating for physical violence. Trump’s imploration for his supporters to fight to save America had a violent connotation. In an interview with ABC News’ Jonathan Karl roughly two months after the insurrection, Trump defended supporters who threatened to “hang” Mike Pence. When Karl told Trump that the chants were terrible, Trump responded: “Well, the people were very angry.” He continued: “How can you pass on a fraudulent vote to Congress? How can you do that?”²⁸¹

Shortly after his Jan. 6 speech, thousands²⁸² of people stormed the Capitol. Many Trump supporters said they felt called upon by the former president to attack. “We were invited here by the president of the United States,” shouted one supporter outside of the building.²⁸³ As violence broke out, Trump was initially against deploying the National Guard, according to reports.²⁸⁴

Elected officials on both sides of the aisle held Trump responsible for the insurrection. In addition to all Democrats, ten Republican members of the House voted to impeach Trump, and seven Republican senators voted to convict him. U.S. Capitol police officer Harry Dunn, attacked during the riot, suggested Trump was responsible for inciting the violence: “There was an attack carried out on January 6th, and a hitman sent them.”²⁸⁵

Trump, on multiple occasions, has praised the insurrectionists. On the day of the attack, he posted a video to Twitter in which he called the insurrectionists “very special.”²⁸⁶ A few months later, during an appearance on Fox News, he said the insurrectionists were “peaceful” and “great people.” He continued: “The love in the air ... I’ve never seen anything like it.”²⁸⁷ Five people died during the insurrection.²⁸⁸

Trump has downplayed the insurrection. In October 2021, he propagated the Big Lie instead of focusing on consequences of the insurrection: “The real insurrection happened on November 3rd, the Presidential Election, not on January 6th—which was a day of protesting the Fake Election results.”²⁸⁹ Instead of taking actions to prevent more violence in the future, Trump has prioritized his own agenda. As of August 2021, 9% of Americans believed the use of force was justified to restore Donald Trump to the presidency, and more than a fourth of Americans believed that President Joe Biden was an illegitimate president.²⁹⁰ Propagating the Big Lie will only lead to more anger, which could lead to a higher percentage of Americans willing to commit violence to achieve their political ambitions.

4.2 Why Trump Fell Short of Authoritarian Rule

Trump fell short of authoritarian rule in part because he did not know how the government functioned. During the first week of his presidency, he signed an executive order that placed restrictions on travel for citizens from some Muslim-majority countries. The order

was not reviewed by DHS, the Justice Department, the State Department nor the Department of Defense, and National Security Council lawyers were prevented from reviewing it.²⁹¹ As Trump was signing the order, leaders of Customs and Border Protection and of Citizenship and Immigration Services — the agencies responsible for enforcing it — were on a telephone briefing on the new policy.²⁹² Homeland security staff were first allowed to review the final details of the order on the day Trump signed it.²⁹³ When the DOJ was asked if its Office of Legal Counsel had reviewed Trump’s order, it responded that it had “no comment.”²⁹⁴ The OLC is supposed to review all proposed executive orders for “form and legality.”²⁹⁵ Trump’s failure to consult with the necessary government agencies reduced the effectiveness of the order. A week after Trump signed it, a federal judge temporarily blocked the administration from enforcing two parts of the order.²⁹⁶

Trump appointed a few officials who he incorrectly thought would do his bidding. Jeff Sessions is one example. Sessions recused himself from the Russia investigation to avoid a conflict of interest, allowing investigators to more closely pursue Trump. Trump called this decision “very unfair to the president,”²⁹⁷ showing how he believed Sessions should have been more loyal to his wishes. “Sessions placed loyalty to his office above fealty to his chief,” Lawrence Douglas of *The Guardian* wrote.²⁹⁸ In June 2019, Trump said appointing Sessions to be attorney general was the “biggest mistake” of his presidency.²⁹⁹

Appointing Jim Mattis to be secretary of defense ultimately hurt Trump. Mattis resigned from his post largely because Trump refused to keep American troops in Syria. Mattis thought it showed a weak commitment to America’s allies,³⁰⁰ as highlighted in his resignation letter: “My views on treating allies with respect and also being clear-eyed about both malign actors and strategic competitors are strongly held and informed by over four decades of immersion in these

issues,” he wrote to Trump. “Because you have the right to have a Secretary of Defense whose views are better aligned with yours on these and other subjects, I believe it is right for me to step down from my position.”³⁰¹ Some military officials attributed Mattis’s decision to principles: “Generals don’t do crazy,” a senior former Pentagon official said.³⁰² Mattis, a four-star general and one of the most respected military officers in the U.S., hurt Trump politically by rejecting him. Allowing Mattis into his administration also inspired him to leverage a stinging attack against the president. “Donald Trump is the first president in my lifetime who does not try to unite the American people—does not even pretend to try. Instead, he tries to divide us,” Mattis wrote in a statement published by *The Atlantic*. “We must reject and hold accountable those in office who would make a mockery of our Constitution.”³⁰³ If Trump runs for office again and wins, he would be careful not to appoint people like Mattis who are more loyal to the country than to him.

Instead, Trump would probably appoint unqualified people like Johnny McEntee who would demonstrate complete subservience. During the final days of his presidency, his “deputy president,” according to a former senior official, was McEntee, the head of the PPO who at one point carried Trump’s bags. Before assuming his role as head of the PPO, McEntee had never held a job that required him to hire employees, yet he suddenly became in charge of “perhaps the most important human-resources department in the world,” vetting and hiring everybody, including ambassadors, Cabinet secretaries, and top intelligence officials. McEntee hired unqualified subordinates like Camryn Kinsey, a 20-year-old Instagram influencer who assumed the role of external relations director. McEntee forced officials to state their allegiance to Trump. His staff scoured the social media accounts of staffers, looking for any signs of disloyalty. One

staffer voted in a Democratic primary a few years prior and was denied a promotion for which she was eligible.³⁰⁴

Trump also fell short of authoritarian rule because Democrats took control of the House during his final two years. With a majority, the Democrats impeached Trump for his communications with Ukraine. The Democratic takeover of the House also prevented Republicans from passing their partisan agenda. Gridlock made it hard for Trump to deliver legislative successes to his supporters.

The coronavirus outbreak doomed Trump's re-election campaign. Prior to the outbreak, the U.S. economy was strong, and Trump enjoyed a great deal of support from Republican voters.³⁰⁵ His response to the pandemic, however, hurt his popularity. Trump repeatedly downplayed the severity of the virus. On February 27, 2020, he said: "It's going to disappear. One day — it's like a miracle — it will disappear."³⁰⁶ A few weeks later, as the U.S. was experiencing more than 100 reported cases daily (the actual number was likely much larger due to limited testing),³⁰⁷ Trump said: "Just stay calm. It will go away." He repeated versions of this claim in ensuing months even as case and death counts rose.³⁰⁸ Trump's approval rating fell from a 2020 high of 49% on March 22 to 38% of June 30,³⁰⁹ and nearly 60% of Americans disapproved of Trump's response to the pandemic, a percentage that varied little in the five months leading up to the election.³¹⁰ Trump admitted that COVID hurt his re-election chances. During a rally in Erie, Pennsylvania, shortly before the election, he said: "Before the plague came in, I had it made. I wasn't coming to Erie ... We had this thing won."³¹¹ Trump lost the election but still came close to staying in power.

Luck and quick thinking during the insurrection possibly staved off a constitutional crisis. A Senate aide directed staffers to gather the boxes that held the certified electoral votes

certificates,³¹² the objects that attracted the insurrectionists. Had the certificates been left behind amidst the evacuation, insurrectionists could have destroyed them. Or, if the insurrectionists took control of the Capitol, Congress might have had to delay the certification. Either way, such a prolonged disruption might have given time for the Eastman plan to go into effect. The U.S. was close to experiencing a constitutional crisis.

4.3 What Trump Might Do in a Second Term

Trump now has a better idea of how the government functions than when he first assumed office. If he returns to the White House, he will better know how to become an autocrat. As David Frum put it, “The Velociraptors have figured out how to work the doorknobs. When Trump arrived last time, he had no idea how the government worked.”³¹³ Frum alluded to Trump’s desire to host a military parade, and how the president was dissuaded because of its exorbitant price tag.³¹⁴ Frum said that in a second Trump administration, “he will not be so easily restrained.”³¹⁵

The president would also focus on targeting his enemies. “I want to just warn people that once he takes office, if he were to win, he doesn't have to worry about re-election anymore,” Grisham said. “He will be about revenge.”³¹⁶ Trump has endorsed multiple candidates who are running to unseat those who impeached him for his role in the insurrection. Included in that list is Harriet Hageman who is running against Cheney³¹⁷ and Steve Carra who is running against Rep. Fred Upton.³¹⁸ If Trump retakes the presidency, his power to defeat those who opposed him will extend beyond his rhetoric. Farah offered some examples: “Whether it's weaponizing the justice department against political opponents, whether it's going after the free press, he would certainly be open to using the military for political reasons as well.”³¹⁹ Not having to worry about re-

election, Trump would fire any attorney general in a second administration if they did not carry out his orders.³²⁰

If the president returns to office, he would likely have fewer checks on his power. The Republicans are likely to take over both the House and Senate after the 2022 midterms,³²¹ and Republicans will swear their loyalty to him: almost all have. Those who do not, like Liz Cheney, will risk their political careers.³²² The president will also endorse winning candidates running in the 2022 midterms, for he enjoys a great deal of support among Republicans; 78% of them want him to run in 2024, according to a poll.³²³ Trump will expect loyalty from his endorsees who win.

Trump's involvement in state races is likely an attempt to help him with a potential 2024 run. Trump has endorsed many candidates for secretary of state who, if elected, he might pressure for help in 2024. Trump endorsed Jody Hice for Georgia secretary of state³²⁴ and loyalist Kristina Karamo for Michigan secretary of state. (Karamo has claimed that Trump won the 2020 election and that left-wing anarchists fueled the insurrection).³²⁵ Trump also endorsed Mark Finchem for Arizona secretary of state, a man who believes Arizona's 2020 election results should be decertified and who was outside of the Capitol during the insurrection.³²⁶ Each secretary of state serves as chief elections officer for their respective state and has power over its elections. In 47 states, the secretary of state certifies election results.³²⁷

Trump frequently appears on Fox News and releases statements commenting on current events. He said he will probably wait until after the 2022 midterms to announce his decision for 2024.³²⁸ If he runs again, expect more of the same: vicious attacks against opponents and more serious attempts to undermine democracy.

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