

Democracies end when they are too democratic

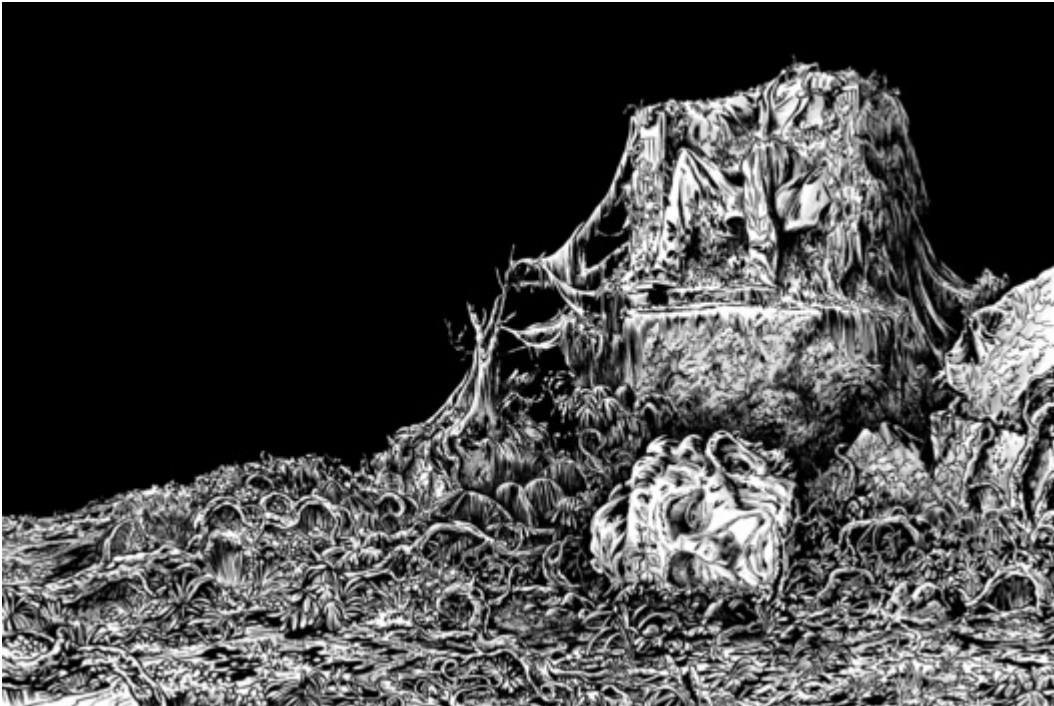


Illustration: Zohar Lazar

Here's a brilliant, chastening dissection of Trump's tyranny-in-the-making from Andrew Sullivan, writing in the [New York Magazine](#). It's framed by a searing analysis of how US democracy got itself into a place where such a thing as a Trump election victory was even conceivable.

Democracies end when they are too democratic. And right now, America is a breeding ground for tyranny.

Andrew Sullivan, [New York Magazine](#), 2 May 2016

As this dystopian election campaign has unfolded, my mind keeps being tugged by a passage in Plato's *Republic*. It has unsettled – even surprised – me from the moment I first read

it in graduate school. The passage is from the part of the dialogue where Socrates and his friends are talking about the nature of different political systems, how they change over time, and how one can slowly evolve into another. And Socrates seemed pretty clear on one sobering point: that "tyranny is probably established out of no other regime than democracy."

What did Plato mean by that? Democracy, for him, I discovered, was a political system of maximal freedom and equality, where every lifestyle is allowed and public offices are filled by a lottery. And the longer a democracy lasted, Plato argued, the more democratic it would become. Its freedoms would multiply; its equality spread. Deference to any sort of authority would wither; tolerance of any kind of inequality would come under intense threat; and multiculturalism and sexual freedom would create a city or a country like "a many-colored cloak decorated in all hues."

This rainbow-flag polity, Plato argues, is, for many people, the fairest of regimes. The freedom in that democracy has to be experienced to be believed – with shame and privilege in particular emerging over time as anathema. But it is inherently unstable. As the authority of elites fades, as Establishment values cede to popular ones, views and identities can become so magnificently diverse as to be mutually uncomprehending. And when all the barriers to equality, formal and informal, have been removed; when everyone is equal; when elites are despised and full license is established to do "whatever one wants," you arrive at what might be called late-stage democracy. There is no kowtowing to authority here, let alone to political experience or expertise.

The very rich come under attack, as inequality becomes increasingly intolerable. Patriarchy is also dismantled: "We almost forgot to mention the extent of the law of equality and of freedom in the relations of women with men and men with women." Family hierarchies are inverted: "A father habituates

himself to be like his child and fear his sons, and a son habituates himself to be like his father and to have no shame before or fear of his parents." In classrooms, "as the teacher ... is frightened of the pupils and fawns on them, so the students make light of their teachers." Animals are regarded as equal to humans; the rich mingle freely with the poor in the streets and try to blend in. The foreigner is equal to the citizen.

And it is when a democracy has ripened as fully as this, Plato argues, that a would-be tyrant will often seize his moment.

He is usually of the elite but has a nature in tune with the time – given over to random pleasures and whims, feasting on plenty of food and sex, and reveling in the nonjudgment that is democracy's civil religion. He makes his move by "taking over a particularly obedient mob" and attacking his wealthy peers as corrupt. If not stopped quickly, his appetite for attacking the rich on behalf of the people swells further. He is a traitor to his class – and soon, his elite enemies, shorn of popular legitimacy, find a way to appease him or are forced to flee. Eventually, he stands alone, promising to cut through the paralysis of democratic incoherence.

It's as if he were offering the addled, distracted, and self-indulgent citizens a kind of relief from democracy's endless choices and insecurities. He rides a backlash to excess—"too much freedom seems to change into nothing but too much slavery" – and offers himself as the personified answer to the internal conflicts of the democratic mess. He pledges, above all, to take on the increasingly despised elites. And as the people thrill to him as a kind of solution, a democracy willingly, even impetuously, repeals itself.

And so, as I chitchatted over cocktails at a Washington office Christmas party in December, and saw, looming above our heads, the pulsating, angry televised face of Donald Trump on Fox News, I couldn't help but feel a little nausea permeate my

stomach. And as I watched frenzied Trump rallies on C-SPAN in the spring, and saw him lay waste to far more qualified political peers in the debates by simply calling them names, the nausea turned to dread. And when he seemed to condone physical violence as a response to political disagreement, alarm bells started to ring in my head. Plato had planted a gnawing worry in my mind a few decades ago about the intrinsic danger of late-democratic life. It was increasingly hard not to see in Plato's vision a murky reflection of our own hyperdemocratic times and in Trump a demagogic, tyrannical character plucked directly out of one of the first books about politics ever written.

Could it be that the Donald has emerged from the populist circuses of pro wrestling and New York City tabloids, via reality television and Twitter, to prove not just Plato but also James Madison right, that democracies "have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention ... and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths"? Is he testing democracy's singular weakness – its susceptibility to the demagogue – by blasting through the firewalls we once had in place to prevent such a person from seizing power? Or am I overreacting?

Perhaps. The nausea comes and goes, and there have been days when the news algorithm has actually reassured me that "peak Trump" has arrived. But it hasn't gone away, and neither has Trump. In the wake of his most recent primary triumphs, at a time when he is perilously close to winning enough delegates to grab the Republican nomination outright, I think we must confront this dread and be clear about what this election has already revealed about the fragility of our way of life and the threat late-stage democracy is beginning to pose to itself.

Plato, of course, was not clairvoyant. His analysis of how democracy can turn into tyranny is a complex one more keyed toward ancient societies than our own (and contains more

wrinkles and eddies than I can summarize here). His disdain for democratic life was fueled in no small part by the fact that a democracy had executed his mentor, Socrates. And he would, I think, have been astonished at how American democracy has been able to thrive with unprecedented stability over the last couple of centuries even as it has brought more and more people into its embrace. It remains, in my view, a miracle of constitutional craftsmanship and cultural resilience. There is no place I would rather live. But it is not immortal, nor should we assume it is immune to the forces that have endangered democracy so many times in human history.

Part of American democracy's stability is owed to the fact that the Founding Fathers had read their Plato. To guard our democracy from the tyranny of the majority and the passions of the mob, they constructed large, hefty barriers between the popular will and the exercise of power. Voting rights were tightly circumscribed. The president and vice-president were not to be popularly elected but selected by an Electoral College, whose representatives were selected by the various states, often through state legislatures.

The Senate's structure (with two members from every state) was designed to temper the power of the more populous states, and its term of office (six years, compared with two for the House) was designed to cool and restrain temporary populist passions. The Supreme Court, picked by the president and confirmed by the Senate, was the final bulwark against any democratic furies that might percolate up from the House and threaten the Constitution. This separation of powers was designed precisely to create sturdy firewalls against democratic wildfires.

Over the centuries, however, many of these undemocratic rules have been weakened or abolished. The franchise has been extended far beyond propertied white men. The presidency is now effectively elected through popular vote, with the Electoral College almost always reflecting the national

democratic will. And these formal democratic advances were accompanied by informal ones, as the culture of democracy slowly took deeper root. For a very long time, only the elites of the political parties came to select their candidates at their quadrennial conventions, with the vote largely restricted to party officials from the various states (and often decided in, yes, smoke-filled rooms in large hotel suites). Beginning in the early 1900s, however, the parties began experimenting with primaries, and after the chaos of the 1968 Democratic convention, today's far more democratic system became the norm.

Direct democracy didn't just elect Congress and the president anymore; it expanded the notion of who might be qualified for public office. Once, candidates built a career through experience in elected or Cabinet positions or as military commanders; they were effectively selected by peer review. That elitist sorting mechanism has slowly imploded. In 1940, Wendell Willkie, a businessman with no previous political office, won the Republican nomination for president, pledging to keep America out of war and boasting that his personal wealth inoculated him against corruption: "I will be under obligation to nobody except the people."

He lost badly to Franklin D. Roosevelt, but nonetheless, since then, nonpolitical candidates have proliferated, from Ross Perot and Jesse Jackson, to Steve Forbes and Herman Cain, to this year's crop of Ben Carson, Carly Fiorina, and, of course, Donald J. Trump. This further widening of our democracy – our increased openness to being led by anyone; indeed, our accelerating preference for outsiders – is now almost complete.

The barriers to the popular will, especially when it comes to choosing our president, are now almost nonexistent. In 2000, George W. Bush lost the popular vote and won the election thanks to Electoral College math and, more egregiously, to a partisan Supreme Court vote. Al Gore's eventual concession

spared the nation a constitutional crisis, but the episode generated widespread unease, not just among Democrats. And this year, the delegate system established by our political parties is also under assault. Trump has argued that the candidate with the most votes should get the Republican nomination, regardless of the rules in place. It now looks as if he won't even need to win that argument – that he'll bank enough delegates to secure the nomination uncontested – but he's won it anyway. Fully half of Americans now believe the traditional nominating system is rigged.

Many contend, of course, that American democracy is actually in retreat, close to being destroyed by the vastly more unequal economy of the last quarter-century and the ability of the very rich to purchase political influence. This is Bernie Sanders's core critique. But the past few presidential elections have demonstrated that, in fact, money from the ultrarich has been mostly a dud. Barack Obama, whose 2008 campaign was propelled by small donors and empowered by the internet, blazed the trail of the modern-day insurrectionist, defeating the prohibitive favorite in the Democratic primary and later his Republican opponent (both pillars of their parties' Establishments and backed by moneyed elites).

In 2012, the fund-raising power behind Mitt Romney – avatar of the one percent – failed to dislodge Obama from office. And in this presidential cycle, the breakout candidates of both parties have soared without financial support from the elites. Sanders, who is sustaining his campaign all the way to California on the backs of small donors and large crowds, is, to put it bluntly, a walking refutation of his own argument. Trump, of course, is a largely self-funding billionaire – but like Willkie, he argues that his wealth uniquely enables him to resist the influence of the rich and their lobbyists. Those despairing over the influence of Big Money in American politics must also explain the swift, humiliating demise of Jeb Bush and the struggling Establishment campaign of Hillary

Clinton. The evidence suggests that direct democracy, far from being throttled, is actually intensifying its grip on American politics.

None of this is necessarily cause for alarm, even though it would be giving the Founding Fathers palpitations. The emergence of the first black president – unimaginable before our more inclusive democracy – is miraculous, a strengthening, rather than weakening, of the system. The days when party machines just fixed things or rigged elections are mercifully done with. The way in which outsider candidates, from Obama to Trump and Sanders, have brought millions of new people into the electoral process is an unmitigated advance. The inclusion of previously excluded voices helps, rather than impedes, our public deliberation. But it is precisely because of the great accomplishments of our democracy that we should be vigilant about its specific, unique vulnerability: its susceptibility, in stressful times, to the appeal of a shameless demagogue.

What the 21st century added to this picture, it's now blindingly obvious, was media democracy – in a truly revolutionary form. If late-stage political democracy has taken two centuries to ripen, the media equivalent took around two decades, swiftly erasing almost any elite moderation or control of our democratic discourse. The process had its origins in partisan talk radio at the end of the past century. The rise of the internet – an event so swift and pervasive its political effect is only now beginning to be understood – further democratized every source of information, dramatically expanded each outlet's readership, and gave everyone a platform. All the old barriers to entry – the cost of print and paper and distribution – crumbled.

So much of this was welcome. I relished it myself in the early aughts, starting a blog and soon reaching as many readers, if not more, as some small magazines do. Fusty old-media institutions, grown fat and lazy, deserved a drubbing. The early independent blogosphere corrected facts, exposed bias,

earned scoops. And as the medium matured, and as Facebook and Twitter took hold, everyone became a kind of blogger. In ways no 20th-century journalist would have believed, we all now have our own virtual newspapers on our Facebook newsfeeds and Twitter timelines – picking stories from countless sources and creating a peer-to-peer media almost completely free of editing or interference by elites. This was bound to make politics more fluid. Political organizing – calling a meeting, fomenting a rally to advance a cause – used to be extremely laborious. Now you could bring together a virtual mass movement with a single webpage. It would take you a few seconds.

The web was also uniquely capable of absorbing other forms of media, conflating genres and categories in ways never seen before. The distinction between politics and entertainment became fuzzier; election coverage became even more modeled on sportscasting; your Pornhub jostled right next to your mother's Facebook page. The web's algorithms all but removed any editorial judgment, and the effect soon had cable news abandoning even the pretense of asking "Is this relevant?" or "Do we really need to cover this live?" in the rush toward ratings bonanzas. In the end, all these categories were reduced to one thing: traffic, measured far more accurately than any other medium had ever done before.

And what mainly fuels this is precisely what the Founders feared about democratic culture: feeling, emotion, and narcissism, rather than reason, empiricism, and public-spiritedness. Online debates become personal, emotional, and irresolvable almost as soon as they begin. Godwin's Law – it's only a matter of time before a comments section brings up Hitler – is a reflection of the collapse of the reasoned deliberation the Founders saw as indispensable to a functioning republic.

Yes, occasional rational points still fly back and forth, but there are dramatically fewer elite arbiters to establish which

of those points is actually true or valid or relevant. We have lost authoritative sources for even a common set of facts. And without such common empirical ground, the emotional component of politics becomes inflamed and reason retreats even further. The more emotive the candidate, the more supporters he or she will get.

Politically, we lucked out at first. Obama would never have been nominated for the presidency, let alone elected, if he hadn't harnessed the power of the web and the charisma of his media celebrity. But he was also, paradoxically, a very elite figure, a former state and U.S. senator, a product of Harvard Law School, and, as it turned out, blessed with a preternaturally rational and calm disposition. So he has masked, temporarily, the real risks in the system that his pioneering campaign revealed. Hence many Democrats' frustration with him. Those who saw in his campaign the seeds of revolutionary change, who were drawn to him by their own messianic delusions, came to be bitterly disappointed by his governing moderation and pragmatism.

The climate Obama thrived in, however, was also ripe for far less restrained opportunists. In 2008, Sarah Palin emerged as proof that an ardent Republican, branded as an outsider, tailor-made for reality TV, proud of her own ignorance about the world, and reaching an audience directly through online media, could also triumph in this new era. She was, it turned out, a John the Baptist for the true messiah of conservative populism, waiting patiently and strategically for his time to come.

Trump, we now know, had been considering running for president for decades. Those who didn't see him coming – or kept treating him as a joke – had not yet absorbed the precedents of Obama and Palin or the power of the new wide-open system to change the rules of the political game. Trump was as underrated for all of 2015 as Obama was in 2007 – and for the same reasons. He intuitively grasped the vanishing authority

of American political and media elites, and he had long fashioned a public persona perfectly attuned to blast past them.

Despite his immense wealth and inherited privilege, Trump had always cultivated a common touch. [He did not hide his wealth in the late-20th century](#) – he flaunted it in a way that connected with the masses. He lived the rich man's life most working men dreamed of – endless glamour and women, for example – without sacrificing a way of talking about the world that would not be out of place on the construction sites he regularly toured. His was a cult of democratic aspiration. His 1987 book, [The Art of the Deal](#), promised its readers a path to instant success; his appearances on “The Howard Stern Show” cemented his appeal. His friendship with Vince McMahon offered him an early entrée into the world of professional wrestling, with its fusion of sports and fantasy. He was a macho media superstar.

One of the more amazing episodes in Sarah Palin's early political life, in fact, bears this out. She popped up in the Anchorage *Daily News* as “a commercial fisherman from Wasilla” on April 3, 1996. Palin had told her husband she was going to Costco but had sneaked into J.C. Penney in Anchorage to see ... one Ivana Trump, who, in the wake of her divorce, was touting her branded perfume. “We want to see Ivana,” Palin told the paper, “because we are so desperate in Alaska for any semblance of glamour and culture.”

Trump assiduously [cultivated this image](#) and took to reality television as a natural. Each week, for 14 seasons of *The Apprentice*, he would look someone in the eye and tell them, “You're fired!” The conversation most humane bosses fear to have with an employee was something Trump clearly relished, and the cruelty became entertainment. In retrospect, it is clear he was training – both himself and his viewers. If you want to understand why a figure so widely disliked nonetheless powers toward the election as if he were approaching a

reality-TV-show finale, look no further. His television tactics, as applied to presidential debates, wiped out rivals used to a different game. And all our reality-TV training has conditioned us to hope he'll win – or at least stay in the game till the final round. In such a shame-free media environment, the assholes often win. In the end, you support them because they're assholes.

In Eric Hoffer's classic 1951 tract, [*The True Believer*](#), he sketches the dynamics of a genuine mass movement. He was thinking of the upheavals in Europe in the first half of the century, but the book remains sobering, especially now. Hoffer's core insight was to locate the source of all truly mass movements in a collective sense of acute frustration. Not despair, or revolt, or resignation – but frustration simmering with rage. Mass movements, he notes (as did Tocqueville centuries before him), rarely arise when oppression or misery is at its worst (say, 2009); they tend to appear when the worst is behind us but the future seems not so much better (say, 2016).

It is when a recovery finally gathers speed and some improvement is tangible but not yet widespread that the anger begins to rise. After the suffering of recession or unemployment, and despite hard work with stagnant or dwindling pay, the future stretches ahead with relief just out of reach. When those who helped create the last recession face no consequences but renewed fabulous wealth, the anger reaches a crescendo.

The deeper, long-term reasons for today's rage are not hard to find, although many of us elites have shamefully found ourselves able to ignore them. The jobs available to the working class no longer contain the kind of craftsmanship or satisfaction or meaning that can take the sting out of their low and stagnant wages. The once-familiar avenues for socialization – the church, the union hall, the VFW – have become less vibrant and social isolation more common. Global

economic forces have pummeled blue-collar workers more relentlessly than almost any other segment of society, forcing them to compete against hundreds of millions of equally skilled workers throughout the planet. No one asked them in the 1990s if this was the future they wanted. And the impact has been more brutal than many economists predicted. No wonder suicide and mortality rates among the white working poor are spiking dramatically.

“It is usually those whose poverty is relatively recent, the ‘new poor,’ who throb with the ferment of frustration,” Hoffer argues. Fundamentalist religion long provided some emotional support for those left behind (for one thing, it invites practitioners to defy the elites as unholy), but its influence has waned as modernity has penetrated almost everything and the great culture wars of the 1990s and 2000s have ended in a rout. The result has been a more diverse mainstream culture – but also, simultaneously, a subculture that is even more alienated and despised, and ever more infuriated and bloody-minded.

This is an age in which a woman might succeed a black man as president, but also one in which a member of the white working class has declining options to make a decent living. This is a time when gay people can be married in 50 states, even as working-class families are hanging by a thread. It’s a period in which we have become far more aware of the historic injustices that still haunt African-Americans and yet we treat the desperate plight of today’s white working class as an afterthought. And so late-stage capitalism is creating a righteous, revolutionary anger that late-stage democracy has precious little ability to moderate or constrain – and has actually helped exacerbate.

For the white working class, having had their morals roundly mocked, their religion deemed primitive, and their economic prospects decimated, now find their very gender and race, indeed the very way they talk about reality, described as a

kind of problem for the nation to overcome. This is just one aspect of what Trump has masterfully signaled as “political correctness” run amok, or what might be better described as the newly rigid progressive passion for racial and sexual equality of outcome, rather than the liberal aspiration to mere equality of opportunity.

Much of the newly energized left has come to see the white working class not as allies but primarily as bigots, misogynists, racists, and homophobes, thereby condemning those often at the near-bottom rung of the economy to the bottom rung of the culture as well. A struggling white man in the heartland is now told to “check his privilege” by students at Ivy League colleges. Even if you agree that the privilege exists, it’s hard not to empathize with the object of this disdain. These working-class communities, already alienated, hear – how can they not? – the glib and easy dismissals of “white straight men” as the ultimate source of all our woes. They smell the condescension and the broad generalizations about them – all of which would be repellent if directed at racial minorities – and see themselves, in Hoffer’s words, “disinherited and injured by an unjust order of things.”

And so they wait, and they steam, and they lash out. This was part of the emotional force of the tea party: not just the advancement of racial minorities, gays, and women but the simultaneous demonization of the white working-class world, its culture and way of life. Obama never intended this, but he became a symbol to many of this cultural marginalization. The Black Lives Matter left stoked the fires still further; so did the gay left, for whom the word *magnanimity* seems unknown, even in the wake of stunning successes.

And as the tea party swept through Washington in 2010, as its representatives repeatedly held the government budget hostage, threatened the very credit of the U.S., and refused to hold hearings on a Supreme Court nominee, the American political and media Establishment mostly chose to interpret such

behavior as something other than unprecedented. But Trump saw what others didn't, just as Hoffer noted: "The frustrated individual and the true believer make better prognosticators than those who have reason to want the preservation of the status quo."

Mass movements, Hoffer argues, are distinguished by a "facility for make-believe ... credulity, a readiness to attempt the impossible." What, one wonders, could be more impossible than suddenly vetting every single visitor to the U.S. for traces of Islamic belief? What could be more make-believe than a big, beautiful wall stretching across the entire Mexican border, paid for by the Mexican government? What could be more credulous than arguing that we could pay off our national debt through a global trade war? In a conventional political party, and in a rational political discourse, such ideas would be laughed out of contention, their self-evident impossibility disqualifying them from serious consideration. In the emotional fervor of a democratic mass movement, however, these impossibilities become icons of hope, symbols of a new way of conducting politics. Their very impossibility is their appeal.

But the most powerful engine for such a movement – the thing that gets it off the ground, shapes and solidifies and entrenches it – is always the evocation of hatred. It is, as Hoffer put it, "the most accessible and comprehensive of all unifying elements." And so [Trump launched his campaign](#) by calling undocumented Mexican immigrants a population largely of rapists and murderers. He moved on to Muslims, both at home and abroad. He has now added to these enemies – with sly brilliance – the Republican Establishment itself. And what makes Trump uniquely dangerous in the history of American politics – with far broader national appeal than, say, Huey Long or George Wallace – is his response to all three enemies. It's the threat of blunt coercion and dominance.

And so after demonizing most undocumented Mexican immigrants, he then vowed to round up and deport all 11 million of them by

force. "They have to go" was the typically blunt phrase he used – and somehow people didn't immediately recognize the monstrous historical echoes. The sheer scale of the police and military operation that this policy would entail boggles the mind. Worse, he emphasized, after the mass murder in San Bernardino, that even the Muslim-Americans you know intimately may turn around and massacre you at any juncture. "There's something going on," he declaimed ominously, giving legitimacy to the most hysterical and ugly of human impulses.

To call this fascism doesn't do justice to fascism. Fascism had, in some measure, an ideology and occasional coherence that Trump utterly lacks. But his movement is clearly fascist in its demonization of foreigners, its hyping of a threat by a domestic minority (Muslims and Mexicans are the new Jews), its focus on a single supreme leader of what can only be called a cult, and its deep belief in violence and coercion in a democracy that has heretofore relied on debate and persuasion. This is the Weimar aspect of our current moment. Just as the English Civil War ended with a dictatorship under Oliver Cromwell, and the French Revolution gave us Napoleon Bonaparte, and the unstable chaos of Russian democracy yielded to Vladimir Putin, and the most recent burst of Egyptian democracy set the conditions for General el-Sisi's coup, so our paralyzed, emotional hyperdemocracy leads the stumbling, frustrated, angry voter toward the chimerical panacea of Trump.

His response to his third vaunted enemy, the RNC, is also laced with the threat of violence. There will be riots in Cleveland if he doesn't get his way. The RNC will have "a rough time" if it doesn't cooperate. "Paul Ryan, I don't know him well, but I'm sure I'm going to get along great with him," Trump has said. "And if I don't? He's gonna have to pay a big price, okay?" The past month has seen delegates to the Cleveland convention receiving death threats; one of Trump's hatchet men, Roger Stone, has already threatened to publish

the hotel rooms of delegates who refuse to vote for Trump.

And what's notable about Trump's supporters is precisely what one would expect from members of a mass movement: their intense loyalty. Trump is their man, however inarticulate they are when explaining why. He's tough, he's real, and they've got his back, especially when he is attacked by all the people they have come to despise: liberal Democrats and traditional Republicans. At rallies, whenever a protester is hauled out, you can almost sense the rising rage of the collective identity venting itself against a lone dissenter and finding a catharsis of sorts in the brute force a mob can inflict on an individual. Trump tells the crowd he'd like to punch a protester in the face or have him carried out on a stretcher. No modern politician who has come this close to the presidency has championed violence in this way. It would be disqualifying if our hyperdemocracy hadn't already abolished disqualifications.

And while a critical element of 20th-century fascism – its organized street violence – is missing, you can begin to see it in embryonic form. The phalanx of bodyguards around Trump grows daily; plainclothes bouncers in the crowds have emerged as pseudo-cops to contain the incipient unrest his candidacy will only continue to provoke; supporters have attacked hecklers with sometimes stunning ferocity. Every time Trump legitimizes potential violence by his supporters by saying it comes from a love of country, he sows the seeds for serious civil unrest.

Trump celebrates torture – the one true love of tyrants everywhere – not because it allegedly produces intelligence but because it has a demonstration effect. At his rallies he has recounted the mythical acts of one General John J. Pershing when confronted with an alleged outbreak of Islamist terrorism in the Philippines. Pershing, in Trump's telling, lines up 50 Muslim prisoners, swishes a series of bullets in the corpses of freshly slaughtered pigs, and orders his men to

put those bullets in their rifles and kill 49 of the captured Muslim men. He spares one captive solely so he can go back and tell his friends. End of the terrorism problem.

In some ways, this story contains all the elements of Trump's core appeal. The vexing problem of tackling jihadist terror? Torture and murder enough terrorists and they will simply go away. The complicated issue of undocumented workers, drawn by jobs many Americans won't take? Deport every single one of them and build a wall to stop the rest. Fuck political correctness. As one of his supporters told an obtuse reporter at a rally when asked if he supported Trump: "Hell yeah! He's no-bullshit. All balls. Fuck you all balls. That's what I'm about." And therein lies the appeal of tyrants from the beginning of time. Fuck you all balls. Irrationality with muscle.

The racial aspect of this is also unmissable. When the enemy within is Mexican or Muslim, and your ranks are extremely white, you set up a rubric for a racial conflict. And what's truly terrifying about Trump is that he does not seem to shrink from such a prospect; he relishes it.

For, like all tyrants, he is utterly lacking in self-control. Sleeping a handful of hours a night, impulsively tweeting in the early hours, improvising madly on subjects he knows nothing about, Trump rants and raves as he surfs an entirely reactive media landscape. Once again, Plato had his temperament down: A tyrant is a man "not having control of himself [who] attempts to rule others"; a man flooded with fear and love and passion, while having little or no ability to restrain or moderate them; a "real slave to the greatest fawning," a man who "throughout his entire life ... is full of fear, overflowing with convulsions and pains." Sound familiar? Trump is as mercurial and as unpredictable and as emotional as the daily Twitter stream. And we are contemplating giving him access to the nuclear codes.

Those who believe that Trump's ugly, thuggish populism has no chance of ever making it to the White House seem to me to be missing this dynamic. Neo-fascist movements do not advance gradually by persuasion; they first transform the terms of the debate, create a new movement based on untrammelled emotion, take over existing institutions, and then ruthlessly exploit events. And so current poll numbers are only reassuring if you ignore the potential impact of sudden, external events – an economic downturn or a terror attack in a major city in the months before November. I have no doubt, for example, that Trump is sincere in his desire to “cut the head off” ISIS, whatever that can possibly mean. But it remains a fact that the interests of ISIS and the Trump campaign are now perfectly aligned. Fear is always the would-be tyrant's greatest ally.

And though Trump's unfavorables are extraordinarily high (around 65 percent), he is already showing signs of changing his tune, pivoting (fitfully) to the more presidential mode he envisages deploying in the general election. I suspect this will, to some fools on the fence, come as a kind of relief, and may open their minds to him once more. Tyrants, like mob bosses, know the value of a smile: Precisely because of the fear he's already generated, you desperately want to believe in his new warmth. It's part of the good-cop-bad-cop routine that will be familiar to anyone who has studied the presidency of Vladimir Putin.

With his appeal to his own base locked up, Trump may well also shift to more moderate stances on social issues like [abortion](#) (he already wants to amend the GOP platform to a less draconian position) or gay and even [transgender rights](#). He is consistent in his inconsistency, because, for him, winning is what counts. He has had a real case against Ted Cruz – that the senator has no base outside ideological-conservative quarters and is even less likely to win a general election. More potently, Trump has a worryingly strong argument [against Clinton](#) herself – or “[crooked Hillary](#),” as he now dubs her.

His proposition is a simple one. Remember James Carville's core question in the 1992 election: Change versus more of the same? That sentiment once elected Clinton's husband; it could also elect her opponent this fall. If you like America as it is, vote Clinton. After all, she has been a member of the American political elite for a quarter-century. Clinton, moreover, has shown no ability to inspire or rally anyone but her longtime loyalists. She is lost in the new media and has struggled to put away a 74-year-old socialist who is barely a member of her party. Her own unfavorables are only 11 points lower than Trump's (far higher than Obama's, John Kerry's, or Al Gore's were at this point in the race), and the more she campaigns, the higher her unfavorables go (including in her own party). She has a Gore problem. The idea of welcoming her into your living room for the next four years can seem, at times, positively masochistic.

It may be that demographics will save us. America is no longer an overwhelmingly white country, and Trump's signature issue – illegal immigration – is the source of his strength but also of his weakness. Nonetheless, it's worth noting how polling models have consistently misread the breadth of his support, especially in these past few weeks; he will likely bend over backward to include minorities in his fall campaign; and those convinced he cannot bring a whole new swath of white voters back into the political process should remember 2004, when Karl Rove helped engineer anti-gay-marriage state constitutional amendments that increased conservative voter turnout. All Trump needs is a sliver of minority votes inspired by the new energy of his campaign and the alleged dominance of the Obama coalition could crack (especially without Obama). Throughout the West these past few years, from France to Britain and Germany, the polls have kept missing the power of right-wing insurgency.

Were Trump to win the White House, the defenses against him would be weak. He would likely bring a GOP majority in the

House, and Republicans in the Senate would be subjected to almighty popular fury if they stood in his way. The 4-4 stalemate in the Supreme Court would break in Trump's favor. (In large part, of course, this would be due to the GOP's unprecedented decision to hold a vacancy open "for the people to decide," another massive hyperdemocratic breach in our constitutional defenses.) And if Trump's policies are checked by other branches of government, how might he react? Just look at his response to the rules of the GOP nomination process. He's not interested in rules. And he barely understands the Constitution. In one revealing moment earlier this year, when asked what he would do if the military refused to obey an illegal order to torture a prisoner, Trump simply insisted that the man would obey: "They won't refuse. They're not going to refuse, believe me." He later amended his remark, but it speaks volumes about his approach to power. Dick Cheney gave illegal orders to torture prisoners and coerced White House lawyers to cook up absurd "legal" defenses. Trump would make Cheney's embrace of the dark side and untrammelled executive power look unambitious.

In his 1935 novel, [*It Can't Happen Here*](#), Sinclair Lewis wrote a counterfactual about what would happen if fascism as it was then spreading across Europe were to triumph in America. It's not a good novel, but it remains a resonant one. The imagined American fascist leader – a senator called Buzz Windrip – is a "Professional Common Man ... But he was the Common Man twenty-times-magnified by his oratory, so that while the other Commoners could understand his every purpose, which was exactly the same as their own, they saw him towering among them, and they raised hands to him in worship."

He "was vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and in his 'ideas' almost idiotic." " 'I know the Press only too well,' " Windrip opines at one point. " 'Almost all editors hide away in spider-dens, men without thought of Family or Public Interest ... plotting how they can put over

their lies, and advance their own positions and fill their greedy pocketbooks.’ ”

He is obsessed with the balance of trade and promises instant economic success: “ ‘I shall not be content till this country can produce every single thing we need ... We shall have such a balance of trade as will go far to carry out my often-criticized yet completely sound idea of from \$3000 to \$5000 per year for every single family.’ ” However fantastical and empty his promises, he nonetheless mesmerizes the party faithful at the nominating convention (held in Cleveland!): “Something in the intensity with which Windrip looked at his audience, looked at all of them, his glance slowly taking them in from the highest-perched seat to the nearest, convinced them that he was talking to each individual, directly and solely; that he wanted to take each of them into his heart; that he was telling them the truths, the imperious and dangerous facts, that had been hidden from them.”

And all the elites who stood in his way? Crippled by their own failures, demoralized by their crumbling stature, they first mock and then cave. As one lone journalist laments before the election (he finds himself in a concentration camp afterward): “I’ve got to keep remembering ... that Windrip is only the lightest cork on the whirlpool. He didn’t plot all this thing. With all the justified discontent there is against the smart politicians and the Plush Horses of Plutocracy – oh, if it hadn’t been one Windrip, it’d been another ... We had it coming, we Respectables.”

And, 81 years later, many of us did. An American elite that has presided over massive and increasing public debt, that failed to prevent 9/11, that chose a disastrous war in the Middle East, that allowed financial markets to nearly destroy the global economy, and that is now so bitterly divided the Congress is effectively moot in a constitutional democracy: “We Respectables” deserve a comeuppance. The vital and valid lesson of the Trump phenomenon is that if the elites cannot

govern by compromise, someone outside will eventually try to govern by popular passion and brute force.

But elites still matter in a democracy. They matter not because they are democracy's enemy but because they provide the critical ingredient to save democracy from itself. The political Establishment may be battered and demoralized, deferential to the algorithms of the web and to the monosyllables of a gifted demagogue, but this is not the time to give up on America's near-unique and stabilizing blend of democracy and elite responsibility. The country has endured far harsher times than the present without succumbing to rank demagoguery; it avoided the fascism that destroyed Europe; it has channeled extraordinary outpourings of democratic energy into constitutional order. It seems shocking to argue that we need elites in this democratic age – especially with vast inequalities of wealth and elite failures all around us. But we need them precisely to protect this precious democracy from its own destabilizing excesses.

And so those Democrats who are gleefully predicting a Clinton landslide in November need to both check their complacency and understand that the Trump question really isn't a cause for partisan Schadenfreude anymore. It's much more dangerous than that. Those still backing the demagogue of the left, Bernie Sanders, might want to reflect that their critique of Clinton's experience and expertise – and their facile conflation of that with corruption – is only playing into Trump's hands. That it will fall to Clinton to temper her party's ambitions will be uncomfortable to watch, since her willingness to compromise and equivocate is precisely what many Americans find so distrustful. And yet she may soon be all we have left to counter the threat. She needs to grasp the lethality of her foe, moderate the kind of identity politics that unwittingly empowers him, make an unapologetic case that experience and moderation are not vices, address much more directly the anxieties of the white working class—and

Democrats must listen.

More to the point, those Republicans desperately trying to use the long-standing rules of their own nominating process to thwart this monster deserve our passionate support, not our disdain. This is not the moment to remind them that they partly brought this on themselves. This is a moment to offer solidarity, especially as the odds are increasingly stacked against them. Ted Cruz and John Kasich face their decisive battle in Indiana on May 3. But they need to fight on, with any tactic at hand, all the way to the bitter end. The Republican delegates who are trying to protect their party from the whims of an outsider demagogue are, at this moment, doing what they ought to be doing to prevent civil and racial unrest, an international conflict, and a constitutional crisis. These GOP elites have every right to deploy whatever rules or procedural roadblocks they can muster, and they should refuse to be intimidated.

And if they fail in Indiana or Cleveland, as they likely will, they need, quite simply, to disown their party's candidate. They should resist any temptation to loyally back the nominee or to sit this election out. They must take the fight to Trump at every opportunity, unite with Democrats and Independents against him, and be prepared to sacrifice one election in order to save their party and their country.

For Trump is not just a wacky politician of the far right, or a riveting television spectacle, or a Twitter phenom and bizarre working-class hero. He is not just another candidate to be parsed and analyzed by TV pundits in the same breath as all the others. In terms of our liberal democracy and constitutional order, Trump is an extinction-level event. It's long past time we started treating him as such.

**This article appears in the May 2, 2016 issue of New York Magazine.*