

## Chapter 6 - American Authoritarianism

### 6.1 History Repeating

The breakdown of democracy comes to nations on the tide of economic and social turmoil. This was the case in Germany following a humiliating defeat in World War I that culminated with the Treaty of Versailles. Germany found itself with less territory and limited military power. Suffering poor economic conditions, German leadership felt betrayed by the government's willingness to surrender and demanded revenge. Faced with the loss of middle-class savings, hyperinflation, the collapse of German banking, high unemployment rates, fears of communism, increased crime, rapid industrialization, and a crumbling of old values, Adolph Hitler exploited people's fear and frustration, using shared grievance to bring people together, demonizing Jews and promoting an ethnically pure unified Germany to bolster economic growth and a renewed sense of national pride.

In the wake of the revolution that had brought communism to Russia only two years earlier, Benito Mussolini galvanized the people of Italy around an anti-communist ideology. Taking advantage of the chaos in the country and cast himself as the champion of law and order and national pride.<sup>242</sup> Mussolini promoted hatred of socialists who did not support Italy entering World War I, uniting large swaths of people disappointed in the weakness and failure of the Italian government. He used fascism to rally against capitalism and socialism and to buttress a sense of extreme nationalism; he used the

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<sup>242</sup> David Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini, the Secret History of Pope Pius XI and the rise of fascism in Europe*, (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014), 26.

exhaustion and desperation of people in post-World War I era Italy to consolidate power, control the economy, build military superiority, and repress opposition through his deployment of the police force known as “black shirts.”

Hitler used religion to garner public support by mutilating its meaning; he subscribed to “Christianity of the sword,” explaining to the public that it was their religious duty to fight injustices, saying in 1923,

we must bring Christianity to the fore again, but the fighting Christianity (Kampfchristentum). Christianity is not the doctrine of mute acceptance and suffering but rather a doctrine of struggle. As Christians, we have a duty to fight against injustice with all means that Christ has given us; and now is the time to fight with fist and sword.<sup>243</sup>

The breakdown of democracy rides the coattails of legitimately elected leaders, the beginning commonly involves outsiders promising economic prosperity, a return to social traditions, and support for the working people versus the elites. They scapegoat a specific group to blame for the nation’s suffering. Divisive rhetoric changes people’s perception of their neighbors or fellow citizens, and grievance is targeted against them. Supporters are then weaponized to commit political violence against their perceived oppressors, while leaders define their opposition as an existential threat. Intolerance is normalized. These leaders may provide some temporary policy improvements but fail to address structural inequalities. As their autocratic tendencies are revealed, they militarize the government, attack the free press, corrupt the justice system and other political institutions, and ultimately change laws related to executive power and elections, if not a

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<sup>243</sup> Richard Weikart, *Hitler's Religion: The Twisted Beliefs That Drove the Third Reich*, (Washington D.C.: Regnery History, 2016)

new constitution altogether. Nationalism takes center stage. Collectively, their views are largely anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQIA+, often accompanied by religious intolerance. Some make these changes at breakneck speed, as was the case with Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini in the 1930s; others proceed at a slower pace, as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Victor Orban in Hungary, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. These leaders advocate draconian laws aimed at “protecting citizens” while these new laws strip away freedoms. The tool that they use is polarization. The more extreme, the more effective. Each of these examples came to power through legitimate electoral means, then stayed in power by obliterating the norms, traditions, and foundations of democracy.

In 1933 following the Nazi party’s success in parliamentary elections, Conservatives chose the Nazi party over leaders of the left, and German President Paul von Hindenburg made Hitler Chancellor. It was a brokered deal that conservative elites agreed to only because they were convinced, they could hold him in check and make use of him for their own political aims. They underestimated his cunning and overestimated his base of support, which had been the very reason they had felt they needed him in the first place. At the height of their power at the polls, the Nazis never pulled the majority they coveted and drew only 38 percent in the country's last free and fair elections at the onset of their twelve-year reign. The old guard did not foresee, or chose not to see, that his actual mission was 'to exploit the methods of democracy to destroy democracy.’”<sup>244</sup>

The 1933 fire in the German parliament building, the Reichstag, gave Hitler a perfect opportunity to exploit; he blamed the fire on communists and used that outrage as

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<sup>244</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, (New York: Random House, 2020) p. 82.

a springboard to seize power suspending civil rights and constitutional protections. This was a turning point for Germany, harkening to its imperial past and evolving to military-centric authoritarian rule. Order and security became the primary talking points. All civil servants, judiciary, teachers, police, and parliament were required to swear an oath of loyalty to Hitler, not a constitution, not the nation, but one man.

Hitler initiated massive public works projects for the unemployed and openly violated the Treaty of Versailles by reinstating the draft but won substantial political support from these efforts; this helped people overlook the more radical policies of the Nazis; racial purity became the new standard for citizenship, German citizens were forbidden from marrying Jews, assistance to inferior people was criminalized, and the propaganda machine explained that racial struggle was a driving force in history and inferior races must be conquered to terminate the threat of diluting the superior race. Hitler declared that Christian churches were “the most important factors in the maintenance of our national identity.” With that support, the German bishops dropped their opposition to the Nazi leader.<sup>245</sup> Hitler was not a religious man, in fact, much has been written that he loathed Christianity. In Hitler’s eyes, Christianity was a religion fit only for slaves; its teaching, he declared, was a rebellion against the natural law of selection by the struggle of the fittest.<sup>246</sup> It has been well documented that the Nazis intended to destroy German Christianity and replace it with German Nationalism, but the encroachment had to be slow and disciplined. The goal was to capture the church

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<sup>245</sup> David Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini, the Secret History of Pope Pius XI and the rise of fascism in Europe*, (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014) 200-1.

<sup>246</sup> Alan Bullock, *Hitler, A Study in Tyranny*, (New York: Harper Perennial 1962)

organization and overtake it for their own purposes in a stealthy manner. Hitler understood that some policies must be camouflaged since they would stir up opposition to his regime, either from other countries or from within Germany. He urged his followers to lie to cover up policies that might offend or antagonize others.<sup>247</sup> The German people looked to Mussolini's 1929 agreement with the Catholic Church as proof of concept; by 1933, the Nazis had a Concordat with the Catholic Church as well. The interest of self-preservation saw the shepherds giving the wolves direct access to the sheep. As soon as Hitler had secured the support of the Church and the full power of dictatorship, he immediately began violating the agreements they had made. When the Church realized how compromised it had become, there was no turning back. The SS and the Gestapo quashed dissent from the clergy.

So too has the American evangelical right made a pact with the Ku Klux Klan, building the

## **6.2 An American Export**

It could be said the seeds of racism that became white supremacy were an American creation, pre-dating much of the Aryan purity campaign of Nazi Germany. June 5, 1934, before the start of World War II, a committee of Nazi bureaucrats met in Berlin to discuss how other countries addressed racial purity.<sup>248</sup> A stenographer was present to record a verbatim transcript, to be preserved by the ever-diligent Nazi

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<sup>247</sup> Richard Weikart, *Hitler's Religion: The Twisted Beliefs That Drove the Third Reich*, (Washington D.C.: Regnery History, 2016), 4.

<sup>248</sup> James Whitman, *Hitler's American Model*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 2.

bureaucracy as a record of a crucial moment in the creation of the new race regime.<sup>249</sup>

That transcript reveals the underlying thesis of Whitman's study: the meeting involved detailed and lengthy discussions of the law of the United States.

They closely examined the United States laws governing intermarriage and immigration.<sup>250</sup> They were looking to move quickly with their racial separation and purity plans. They knew the United States was centuries ahead of them with its miscegenation statutes and race-based immigration bans.<sup>251</sup> Historians Johnpeter Horst Grill and Robert L. Jenkins said, "the American South, with its long-established system of white supremacy, was a source of interest to the Nazis as they, too, sought to work out their own system of Aryan supremacy."<sup>252</sup> In the 1930s, Nazi publications, which were anti-black in addition to being anti-Semitic, praised the "southern way," pointing out that many Americans were also working against "racial bastardization," evident from, among other things, the 30 or so U.S. states that had legal restrictions on interracial marriage.<sup>253</sup> In 1912, Dr. A. Rochs-Nordhausen, who had lived in the American South for twenty-five years, tried to convince the German Reichstag, then debating the issue of miscegenation in German colonies, that the South's policy of strict racial separation was the only way to save the white race.<sup>254</sup> Hitler may have been familiar with Ku Klux Klan ideology.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, (New York: Random House, 2020), 79.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Johnpeter Horst Grill, and Robert L. Jenkins. "The Nazis and the American South in the 1930s: A Mirror Image?" *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 4 (1992): 667–94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2210789>.

<sup>253</sup> Sean Braswell, "When the Nazis courted the KKK," *OZY*, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/when-the-nazis-courted-the-kkk/60067/>

<sup>254</sup> Dr. A. Rochs-Nordhausen, "Tagesfragen," *Grenzboten*, May 31, 1912, pages 38-39, in U. S. National Archives Microfilm Series T-81, Records of the Deutsches Ausland-Institut, Stuttgart (hereinafter cited as NA T-81: DAI), roll 618, frames 5411806.

Termed "American fascism" by one German periodical, a local Klan unit was established in Berlin in 1925, although apparently little came of it.<sup>255</sup>

The American race-based ideology was exported to Europe, which had its own long-standing traditions of demonizing Jews. The term anti-Semitism was coined by Wilhelm Marr in his 1879 book *Der Sieg des Judentums über das Germentum* (The Victory of Jewry over Germandom), but the anti-Semitic sentiment was present as far back as ancient Rome as well; Cicero's account of the Jews—the first to appear in Latin literature—appears in a speech delivered in 59 BCE during the trial against Lucius Valerius Flaccus, ex-governor of Asia<sup>256</sup> referred to "the odium of Jewish gold" and how they "[stick together]" and are "influential in informal assemblies."<sup>257</sup> The new world was not immune to antisemitism. Small Jewish communities had formed in five American colonies, the first as early as 1654. During the Civil War, anti-Jewish intolerance increased dramatically on both sides, with both the Union and Confederacy making baseless accusations that Jews aided the opposing side.<sup>258</sup> General Ulysses S. Grant even issued an order to expel all Jews from the territory under his command, blaming Jews "as a class" for the smuggling and cotton speculation conducted by a diverse network of people in his region.<sup>259</sup> After Jewish expulsions in northern

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<sup>255</sup> Johnpeter Horst Grill, and Robert L. Jenkins. "The Nazis and the American South in the 1930s: A Mirror Image?" *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 4 (1992): 667–94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2210789>.

<sup>256</sup> Miriam Ben Zeev, "The Myth of Cicero's Anti-Judaism," *Religio licita?": Rom und die Juden* edited by Görg K. Hasselhoff and Meret Strothmann, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 109.

<sup>257</sup> "The Speech of M.T. Cicero in Defence of Lucius Flaccus," accessed October 17, 2022. [https://pages.pomona.edu/~cmc24747/sources/cic\\_web/cic\\_speeches/cic\\_balb.htm](https://pages.pomona.edu/~cmc24747/sources/cic_web/cic_speeches/cic_balb.htm).

<sup>258</sup> "Antisemitism in American History," Ant-Defamation League, assessed November 28, 2022, <https://antisemitism.adl.org/antisemitism-in-american-history/>.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

Mississippi and Paducah, Kentucky, President Lincoln learned of Grant's order and put a stop to it, condemning the wronging of an entire group for the behavior of only "a few sinners."<sup>260</sup>

The United States was built on commerce, trade, bigotry, and white supremacy, relying on slavery to grow the economy while aspiring to a more egalitarian society. Democracy and the marketplace of ideas created a substructure for stability. But even after slavery was abolished in America, the struggle for equity and equality in representation continued, particularly against a tide of Jim Crow laws passed in protest of Reconstruction.

Efforts to subvert equality started immediately after the 13th Amendment was ratified in 1865 and continued for nearly 100 years. The KKK became somewhat cloaked during Reconstruction, as it created local conditions that maintained the segregated and discriminatory social structure and economic status quo that had existed prior to the Enforcement Acts mentioned in chapter five. Black Codes and Jim Crow laws marginalized Blacks by limiting jobs, the right to vote, and access to education and criminalization of anyone who assisted them. These reactionary forces effectively unwound or nullified the acts that intended to assist Reconstruction.

The justice system was stacked against the newly freed blacks, populated with many former confederate soldiers working in law enforcement and judges in courts. Blacks were often sentenced to labor camps creating a workforce for white former slave

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<sup>260</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism*, (Yale University Press, 2004), 120-121.



owners to exploit. The Department of Justice was created in 1870 to handle all criminal prosecutions and civil suits in which the United States has an interest.<sup>261</sup> Despite the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 providing a path to enforcement of federal civil and political rights at a local level, denial of rights regularly plagued the south. Furthermore, the growing grievance of white supremacists at the inclusion of blacks in society caused an increase in extra-judicial activity and outright violence aimed at intimidation and suppression of expanded rights. The KKK terrorized southern blacks and other minorities well into the 1900s and re-established itself in 1915, demonstrating many of the same tyrannical beliefs that fascism would: racial purity, authoritarian leaders, paramilitary training and organization, denial of rights for “others,” intimidation and threats of violence.

After World War I, there was a shift in political policy, first appearing during Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s presidency and brought to fruition with The New Deal, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century brought a realignment resulting in the adaptation of patriot and far-right rhetoric within the republican party. John F. Kennedy advocated civil rights policies, and Lyndon B Johnson continued his legacy; Democratic presidents supported civil rights laws, resulting in an exodus of racists from the Democratic party. Republicans publicly mainstreamed white grievance politics. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that the *Plessy* doctrine of “separate but equal” was unconstitutional. Congress swiftly passed the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act,

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<sup>261</sup> “About DOJ,” Department of Justice, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/about>

and the Fair Housing Act. Democracy, social progress, and this legislation helped the United States repel discriminatory ideology, and racist and misogynistic influences.

In his recent book on fascism in America, Tony DiMaggio wrote that Trump rose to power because of the longstanding cultivation of racist, authoritarian, and xenophobic beliefs on the American right in the years and decades running up to his election in 2016.<sup>262</sup> While there is certainly room for dispute and several other causes that made the Trump presidency a possibility, including the loss of working class support for the policies of the Democratic party, the persistent and inconvenient facts remain that the troubling racism promoted in both the post-civil war America and Nazi Germany share remarkable similarities and can be seen in much of the rhetoric of today's extreme right political flank. Specifically with respect to inter-racial marriage, the Respect for Marriage Act of 2022 which provides statutory authority for same-sex and interracial marriages just narrowly passed the Senate 61-36, only 12 Republican Senators supported the marriage equality protections and all 36 Senators voting against it were Republican.

Divisive rhetoric used to categorize people and pejorative terms against the opposition, the Trump administration developed a new language of propaganda. Our Constitution was the only barrier that protected the free press from the administration's attempts to silence dissent, and they tested it, revoking the press pass from journalists they viewed as unfriendly. In 2018 and 2019, federal judges ordered the passes restored by the White House. From the new vocabulary sprang a wealth of conspiracy theories and conspiracy groups, alleging a Democrat-run pedophilia ring, sowing doubt in the

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<sup>262</sup> Anthony DiMaggio, *Rising Fascism in America: It Can Happen Here*, New York: Routledge, 2022.

election security, and asserting that Trump ran a secret military operation that would save the world, millions of followers became true believers.

Democracy depends in part on the willingness of leaders in public service to adhere to ethical boundaries, but in the Trump administration, such behavior represented insubordination. Congresspeople and administration officials protected their positions by subservience. Trump famously demanded loyalty in a private dinner with then-FBI Director James Comey, and when Comey demurred, Trump fired him.<sup>263</sup> Speaking truth to power is a pillar of governance, but in its place, in an authoritarian or fascist regime, only compliance is acceptable.

A coordinated propaganda campaign was deployed to distract the public from the decay that had crept into the national structure, creating distrust in the national sub-conscience. “This extremism has been building for decades with rightwing media pundits’ embrace of increasingly conspiratorial, authoritarian, racist and xenophobic messages, which has gone unacknowledged for the most part in mainstream political and academic discourse,”<sup>264</sup> only now is the extent of coordinated efforts of various news hosts, Congresspeople, administration officials, and donors to create an alternative reality for the masses being exposed. Their narrative arc is bent toward glorifying strength, refusal to admit failure or defeat, the invention of an alternate reality, a vocabulary unique to supporters, and an imaginary antagonist. In an Orwellian moment, at a 2018 Veterans rally in Kansas City, Trump told the crowd, “Don’t believe the crap you see

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<sup>263</sup> Michael Schmidt, “In a Private Dinner, Trump Demanded Loyalty. Comey Demurred,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/11/us/politics/trump-comey-firing.html>

<sup>264</sup> Anthony DiMaggio, *Rising Fascism in America: It Can Happen Here*, New York: Routledge, 2022.

from these people, the fake news ... What you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening."

The authoritarian backslide was exacerbated by a polarized Congress fractured along party lines, unwilling to hold either Trump or party leaders accountable owing to their ambition and desire to retain power. Checks and balances are intended to prevent this corruption. While the founders may have anticipated human nature, they did not envision that those responsible for enforcing the checks and balances would be consumed with power over the oath they swore to uphold the Constitution, party over country. Even the notion that having "adults in the room" was of limited value as the world watched the revolving door of the White House Chief of Staff, Attorney General, Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of State summarily dismissed when Trump's demands were not sufficiently appeased, replaced by ever more servile acting appointees who would indulge the whims and blatantly criminal intents. The self-proclaimed "rule of law" party, the Trump administration, resulted in more than 215 indictments for criminal behavior, more than any other administration in history.<sup>265</sup> When seasoned political and governmental leadership failed, the backstop was bureaucracy. The bureaucratic procedure on January 6<sup>th</sup> was adequate, but only by narrow margins.

In the wake of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, Republican leaders nationwide criticized Trump's rhetoric, his encouragement of civic violence, and the direct catastrophic result of his inaction. Within weeks they pivoted and demurred. They

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<sup>265</sup> Tom Kertscher, "Many more criminal indictments under Trump, Reagan, and Nixon than under Obama, Clinton and Carter," *Politifact*. January 9, 2020.  
<https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/jan/09/facebook-posts/many-more-criminal-indictments-under-trump-reagan-/>

replaced Secretaries of State with those who believed Trump's election lies and shifted the power of state legislatures to choose electors, foreshadowing a future where state legislatures select the President and Vice President rather than the voters. Administrative competence is a fragile backstop to an administration bent on staying in power at any cost. Relying on the tattered scaffolding of American democracy to ensure continuity of government is not a responsible way to shepherd the American experiment. America appeared to be at the cusp of a new authoritarian uprising.

The idea of the state as a central feature is not occurring in a traditional sense in this episode of *The Fall of Rome: America Edition* because the United States relies on the Constitution and federal and state laws. Still, the Trump agenda has been to undermine rights on a national level so that the states can undercut them further. Overturning rights established more than 50 years ago have become a feature, not a bug of the Trump administration. The conservative majority on the Supreme Court has already demolished the right to abortion, separation of church and state, brought religion to the public domain in schools, rejected the idea of a state's right to create its gun laws, and then simultaneously insisted another state must spend taxpayer dollars on religious education are just a few recent developments that can be attributed to the Republican effort to remake America today. Up next, a ban on contraception and books, challenges to marriage equality, and the fundamental right to privacy, all perfectly within the authoritarian playbook but utterly in conflict with the notion of liberty, freedom, and limited government that conservatives claim to advocate. The newly approved double-speak provides Texas educational teachings that refer to slavery as "involuntary relocation." The separation of church and state was a cornerstone of American identity,

enshrined in the First Amendment. The freedom of religion (and freedom from religion) was one of the most alluring draws for adventurous Europeans to leave the judgments of home for the new world in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, at a recent Turning Point USA Student Action Summit, one of Trump's loudest advocates, firebrand Marjorie Taylor Greene said the GOP should be the party of "Christian Nationalists."

The way Trump has been able to activate white evangelicals is not unlike Catholics' support for Mussolini or Hitler. Despite some of his radical policies, they essentially see Trump as fighting for their beliefs and advancing their interests. They feel their side has been winning recently on vital political matters. But when it comes to Trump's personal qualities and conduct, many express mixed feelings. Even among this strongly supportive constituency, most do not view Trump as *very* religious, honest, or morally upstanding.<sup>266</sup> That seems in line with their party preference; In the current survey, 83 percent of white evangelicals identify with or lean toward the Republican Party, as do 64 percent of white Protestants who are not evangelical and 65 percent of white Catholics. People with good moral values that love God and want the best for the country can overlook all the ways Trump's life and deeds contradict the teachings of Jesus. Through mangled interpretations of the New Testament, conservatives of today have created a version of Christianity that speaks to their resentments, desires, and fears. Trump sees himself as the voice of the people, of their grievances, especially those in rural areas. They see him that way too.

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<sup>266</sup> "White Evangelicals See Trump As Fighting For Their Beliefs Though Many Have Mixed Feeling About His Personal Conduct, Pew Research Center, March 12, 2020, accessed October 31, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/03/12/white-evangelicals-see-trump-as-fighting-for-their-beliefs-though-many-have-mixed-feelings-about-his-personal-conduct/>

The recent pivot of the Republican party toward dictators has hardly been subtle. The cozy relationship between Trump and his surrogates with rogue dictators like Vladimir Putin, Kim Jun Un, Xi Jinping, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Victor Orban has been displayed for years. At the recent CPAC meeting in Texas, the Hungarian prime minister called immigration “population replacement or inundation,” saying, “we are willing to mix with one another, but we do not want to become peoples of mixed race.” This comment resulted in the resignation of his longtime advisor Zsuzsa Hegedus who called the statement “a pure Nazi speech worthy of Goebbels.”<sup>267</sup> Experts on comparative politics say the GOP is an extremist outlier, no longer belonging in the same conversation with “normal” right-wing parties like Canada’s Conservative Party (CPC) or Germany’s Christian Democratic Party (CDU). Instead, it more closely resembles more extreme right parties — like Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary or Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s AKP in Turkey — that have actively worked to dismantle democracy in their own countries.<sup>268</sup>

Perhaps the comparison of post-World War I fascism with the destabilizing environment created over decades by the Republican party can be chalked up to an overreaction. Or, maybe Americans of the future will look back on this era and ask how Americans today could miss the signs that were so clearly signaled in history as many Italians did in 1919 and Germans did in 1933. These similarities are not coincidences; while the characteristics, events, and the movement that accompanies them have not resulted in the genocide of millions of people, that does not prevent the fall of democracy

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<sup>267</sup> Dana Milbank, “A Hero of Trump’s Right Shows His True Colors: Whites Only,” *The Washington Post*, July 27, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/27/viktor-orban-cpac-conservatives-welcome-racism>

<sup>268</sup> Zack Beauchamp, “The Republican Party is an Authoritarian Outlier,” *Vox*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/21449634/republicans-supreme-court-gop-trump-authoritarian>

to a one-party dictatorship. If Americans fail to recognize the authoritarian threat to our republic, there may no longer be a democracy to save.