

David White's Response
Topical Seminars, November, 2022

Do diverse democracies provide sufficient benefit to their citizens to justify efforts to support their survival?

The materials and the questions provided for this month's TS session seem to flow from this question. So, I would like to speak to this question specifically.

Before this question can have any meaning, we need to explore what our goal might be. "Sufficient benefit to their citizens" for what? What, precisely, do we want from a government?

I found that all of the written materials provided for this seminar, along with the video of Professor Mounk with Jane Coaston, assume a shared point of view of government's role in our lives. Professor Mounk's ideas make sense from this perspective. But what if we don't share this point of view?

Is it necessary for us all to get along? Is effective governance dependent on a homogenous viewpoint of what society should be? What, in fact, is the compelling state interest (or what are the compelling state interests) that should serve as foundational to the structure of an effective government?

In the excerpt in which Professor Mounk describes a park as a metaphor for a diverse democracy, Mounk says, "Visitors pursue a huge variety of legitimate activities in parks." Is providing such a thing fundamental to a government? Should it be? "...huge variety of legitimate activities..." What constitutes a "huge variety" and what are "legitimate activities" with regard to government?

In today's political environment, I suspect that four candidates for public office, a MAGA, a mainstream Republican, a mainstream Democrat, and a "woke-left" would each answer my question about governmental "legitimate activities" differently from the other three. Thus Mounk's metaphor falls apart before he gets started.

I have observed, generally, that those who align themselves with the political "left" tend to think that society is best served when people of varying experiences, ideas, ideals, and individual thoughts on the value of presented identity are allowed to express themselves openly. They tend to support government using its authority to maintain public order and to establish legal regulation toward a goal of every individual being protected under law regardless of their expressed identity. In addition, they tend to support progressive taxation policies, a welfare state, and public institutions that provide for a strongly egalitarian society in which opportunity is equally available to all. They claim that these ideas are fundamental to individual freedom, which should reign supreme in the public arena.

In contrast, those on the political "right" tend to think that society should be more homogenous, with individual identity based in large part on a given understanding of cultural heritage and shared values. They tend to support legislation based on a foundation of conservative principles of right and wrong, and equality before such laws for everyone, regardless of circumstance. While they support public institutions, they prefer these be limited and only come into play in dire circumstances. They are

suspicious of progressive taxation and other forms of resource reallocation, thinking that it might well be a gateway toward introducing socialism into the framework of society.

In this, it makes sense that there would be a difference of opinion on the shared government's legal support for immigration, expressed personal identity (including sexual identity, racial identity, and cultural identity, among others), individual rights and freedoms, the role of public education, and other ideas about government's role in our lives.

I am attaching an essay by a political commentator from the other side of the aisle, David French. He is a politically conservative evangelical Christian who formerly wrote for National Review. He would not be identified with MAGA, however, and has registered as a political independent since 2018. He spoke out publicly against the Trump candidacy in 2016 and faced significant backlash as a result. He holds a Juris Doctorate from Harvard and is a former Major in the United States Army, having served as a squadron judge-advocate during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He currently serves as senior editor of The Dispatch and as a contributing writer for The Atlantic. It might be of interest to folks wondering how the center-right speaks to the issues that Mounk addresses.

I look forward to an interesting discussion.

Against the Demolition of the American Spirit

The new revolutionaries fabricate the case for American failure.

David French

Oct 23, 2022

I'm going to start with a "both sides" trigger warning. This newsletter is going to describe a profound problem that is emanating from both left and right—the demolition of the American spirit. It's a phenomenon that combines the accurate diagnosis of real problems with the fabrication or exaggeration of additional crises to create a profound loss of confidence in (or even contempt for) this nation we love.

I'll never forget the first time I encountered Americans who hated America. It was in law school, and when I talked to my more radical classmates I heard their case. America was a racist, colonial power. It began as a slave empire, expanded through conquest and genocide, and then—even as it cast itself as a liberator in the world wars and Cold War—propped up vicious tyrants in the name of liberty.

In this telling, all of the bad aspects of American history were highlighted, amplified, sometimes exaggerated or even fabricated, and then repeated endlessly to create a picture of a nation in whose DNA racism and conquest was inescapably imprinted. The solution to the crisis of America's past and present was nothing less than revolution—a dismantling of America's classical liberal founding and its replacement with illiberal structures that used the force of law and government to uproot entrenched power structures and re-order society from the top down.

Do aspects of this story sound familiar? They should. Not long ago the *New York Times* mainstreamed much of this story with its [1619 Project](#), a collection of essays that together presented a devastating indictment of American history. Originally, the digital copy of the 1619 project contained the claim that 1619—when African slaves

were first brought to American shores—represented the “true founding” of the American nation. That phrase has since been deleted.

But even with the phrase deleted, the project failed in its effort to “finally” tell the American story “truthfully.” It’s not that the entire project was fundamentally flawed. Americans who grow up hearing only of American greatness need to know our dark side, and the darkness could be very dark indeed. But like the far-left critiques I heard in law school, the critiques of the 1619 Project went too far.

I don’t want to rehash the entire historical debate, but in December 2019, a group of America’s leading historians wrote the *New York Times* to lodge a serious complaint. Much of the history was simply wrong. They didn’t shy away from troubling truths. “Raising profound, unsettling questions about slavery and the nation’s past and present,” they wrote, “is a praiseworthy and urgent public service.”

But there were errors. Serious errors:

These errors, which concern major events, cannot be described as interpretation or “framing.” They are matters of verifiable fact, which are the foundation of both honest scholarship and honest journalism. They suggest a displacement of historical understanding by ideology. Dismissal of objections on racial grounds — that they are the objections of only “white historians” — has affirmed that displacement.

More:

On the American Revolution, pivotal to any account of our history, the project asserts that the founders declared the colonies’ independence of Britain “in order to ensure slavery would continue.” This is not true. If supportable, the allegation would be astounding — yet every statement offered by the project to validate it is false. Some of the other material in the project is distorted, including the claim that “for the most part,” black Americans have fought their freedom struggles “alone.”

Share this critique of the 1619 Project in Red America, and people will nod along. In fact, they likely know all about it. The very popularity and prominence of the 1619

Project fuels the fire of the radical right. It's evidence American institutions have lost their way.

Whereas the far left sees America as irredeemably racist, the far right sees America as irredeemably woke. All of the institutions of American life are "captured" by the left—from the academy, to corporate America, to the military, to pop culture. Even our churches and religious schools are infected by wokeism. Conservatives have conserved nothing.

[Here's a version of that argument](#) by John Daniel Davidson, a senior editor at *The Federalist*.

After all, what have conservatives succeeded in conserving? In just my lifetime, they have lost much: marriage as it has been understood for thousands of years, the First Amendment, any semblance of control over our borders, a fundamental distinction between men and women, and, especially of late, the basic rule of law.

[Here's Michael Anton](#), the author of 2016's notorious Flight 93 essay, writing in American Greatness:

Have we conserved [the American regime]? Does it function as it was designed to do? As a political scientist, and as a historian of sorts before that, I find the question laughable. If any of you want to make the case that we still live in the founders' regime, go ahead.

Rod Dreher has decamped to Hungary, where he writes piece after piece about the soft totalitarianism of the American left and the coming repression of American Christians. The rhetoric of American doom and decline is everywhere. In 2020 I debated Eric Metaxas twice, a prominent Evangelical author, and both times he assured the audience that electing Joe Biden would end America as we know it.

Spend any time online, and you see an entire tribe of right-wing Americans who mainline content from [Libs of TikTok](#), an account that combs the internet for examples of the wildest leftist radicalism and then retransmits it to horrified

conservative audiences as if it's unveiling exactly what the average Democrat truly believes.

The radical left seethes with fury at the America that was and believes that the America that is cannot escape its horrific past, at least not without revolutionary change. The radical right longs for the America that was, loathes the America that is, and believes the America that will be is doomed, at least not without revolutionary change.

This is the postliberal call. This is where nationalist conservatives want to wield power to "reward friends and punish enemies." This is where Davidson says, "The government will have to become, in the hands of conservatives, an instrument of renewal in American life—and in some cases, a blunt instrument indeed."

That means, in his words, "a dramatic expansion of the criminal code." This means draconian restrictions on free speech and on parents' rights. Desperate times call for desperate measures. Again, here's Davidson:

To those who worry that power corrupts, and that once the right seizes power it too will be corrupted, they certainly have a point. If conservatives manage to save the country and rebuild our institutions, will they ever relinquish power and go the way of Cincinnatus? It is a fair question, and we should attend to it with care *after* we have won the war.

Anton, for his part, calls for rediscovering "the right of revolution":

I maintain it as axiomatic that you can't have natural rights without a right of revolution, just as you can't have the founding without an actual revolution, and since you can't have the regime of the founders without natural rights, you can't have the founding principles or the founders' regime without a right of revolution.

Just as the radical left can point to very real and substantial American sins, so can the radical right point to profound problems in contemporary America. The repression and intolerance of the radical left is a real problem, on campus and off.

Americans are stressed and anxious. Deaths of despair are a national crisis. American marriage and birth rates are declining.

But does the right have the answer? Donald Trump was elected in large part because millions of Americans believed the story of the national crisis. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and those desperate measures included nominating and electing a man who would stand up to the left, who wasn't afraid to smash his enemies. He was the person to confront "[American carnage](#)."

Yet what happened? For the first time since the Carter administration, the [abortion rate increased](#). Drug overdose deaths [hit a record high](#). [The murder rate spiked](#). After stabilizing in the Obama years, [the marriage rate plunged](#). And for the first time since the Civil War, the American transfer of power was anything but peaceful. A violent mob, fueled by ridiculous lies, attacked and briefly seized the Capitol.

It would be silly to lay all of these developments at Donald Trump's feet. They're complicated phenomena with complicated causes. But when you elect a man to address the "carnage," and the carnage gets worse, then it's time to reconsider the approach. The sheer scale of the negative changes during his four years in power suggest that there is a high cost to electing a cultural wrecking ball. You might think you've aimed your weapon only at your enemies, but there is always collateral damage in cultural conflict.

And what is the far right's response to the failure of the Trump presidency? Yes, they're reconsidering. They're doubling down. To them, Trump's failures just prove how powerful the left truly is. Or, [as Sohrab Ahmari wrote in the *New York Times*](#), "the trouble with Trumpism appears to be something else: It's not that it was too radical—it wasn't radical enough."

But it's time to take a step back. Through their combination of truth, exaggeration, and outright falsehood, the far left and far right undermine American confidence and fabricate an existential threat to the American idea.

Is the First Amendment destroyed? By no means. Americans are more free from government censorship than anytime in the entire history of the United States.

Is religious liberty on the verge of extinction? Absolutely not. In fact, religious freedom is enjoying a decade-long winning streak at the Supreme Court, with most of the key cases decided through right-left supermajorities, including cases decided 9-0 and 7-2. Religious communities are more secure from government persecution than they've ever been.

And it's especially absurd to read claims that classical liberalism and originalism aren't adequate for the moment in the months after decades of patient and courageous pro-life advocacy and democratic participation resulted in reversing Roe, with justices from the last three Republican presidents in the majority.

Where are we on addressing American racism? Of course we've got very far to go. One of the most humbling experiences of my life was realizing both how little I knew about America's past and failing to understand the full extent of the challenges of the present. As I've written many times, one does not address all the consequences of 345 years of violent oppression (from slavery to Jim Crow) in the 58 years of contentious change since the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

But we also can't deny progress. America is profoundly different from the way it was in even the relatively recent past.

And we can't deny the reality that America's most marginalized communities have made tremendous strides not by overthrowing the American founding but by appealing to its highest principles. There was no greater and more eloquent champion of free speech than Frederick Douglass. In his most famous speech, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir."

Just as Americans enjoy greater rights to free speech and freedom of religion than at any time in American history, more Americans enjoy the equal protection of the law than ever before.

The principles of the American founding—the declaration that all men are created equal and possess unalienable rights—have always been at war with the darkness of human nature and our boundless capacity for evil deeds. The American story isn't just about 1776. [It's about 1619 as well](#), and the American story is largely about the battle of the grim reality of 1619 against the high calling of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. I wrote this two years ago:

When the first slaves arrived in the New World in 1619, it signaled not the founding of something new, but rather the reaffirmation of something very, very old—the same oppression and domination that characterized human history from the dawn of time.

When the Founders ratified the Declaration of Independence (and later the Constitution and Bill of Rights), they created something new—a civilization centered around the *aspiration* of human liberty and dignity. At this early stage, the idea of America contradicted most of the reality of America, but the idea had startling, resonating power.

The idea has power still, and depriving Americans of their fundamental rights to win a culture war doesn't solve a crisis, it *is* the crisis—whether that comes from the right or the left. America has already had the revolutions it needs.

In 1776, we proclaimed our ideals. In 1865 we experienced a [“new birth of freedom.”](#) In 1964, we took a legal sledgehammer to the [“badges of incidents of slavery”](#) that still plagued our land. That story is a hard story. It's a continuing story. But it's ultimately a good story. Don't let the new revolutionaries demolish the American spirit.