



## The Trouble with Trumpism: The Culture Wars for U.S. American Identity and the Normalization of Hate

*Brad Bullock*  
*Shippensburg University*  
*BPBullock@ship.edu*

Pankaj Mishra's *Age of Anger* provides a historical context for understanding the recent, global rise of authoritarian populist movements – all of which ultimately turn on issues of national identity and are fueled by a language of hate that sanctions exclusion, violence, and social unrest. Mishra's framework is useful for evaluating Trumpism: a U.S. sociocultural movement that is at once both a representative and a unique form of populism, and one already particularly disruptive to world order. And yet, Mishra's paradigm only takes us so far. This paper contends that, in addition to tolerating or endorsing misogyny, racism, and xenophobia, the language of Trumpism emphasizes hatred of the factual truth, arguably the most dangerous form of hate speech. By employing a larger historical context, this analysis seeks to shed some light onto why – despite a bewildering series of political events – the U.S. faces a very real likelihood that Donald Trump, a convicted felon, could win the 2024 U.S. presidential election.

**Dr. Brad Bullock** is *Distinguished Visiting Professor* at Shippensburg University, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. His wide academic interests include historical/comparative analyses of social, political, and economic trends at the national and international level. His broad body of published work includes topics such as globalization, international development, political economy, sex trafficking, immigrant ethnographies, the Caribbean, diaspora studies and South Asian ethnic identity. A veteran of international travel, he has been recognized for both his research and teaching excellence. He is also *Charles A. Dana Professor* of Sociology Emeritus at Randolph College, in Virginia, U.S.A.

### Who's Telling What Story?

For anyone paying attention to politics in the United States these days – to its angry, divisive, and dysfunctional nature and the effective capture of its Republican party by Donald Trump and his supporters, despite Trump facing numerous felony charges in multiple criminal trials – a common question is “how is this possible”? In answer to this question, the only way to gain a reasonable understanding is to put recent events into a larger context and a much longer story.

Pankaj Mishra's *Age of Anger* (2017) provides an epochal paradigm for understanding the current, global rise of authoritarian populist movements – all of which ultimately turn on issues of national identity and are fueled by a language of hate that sanctions exclusion, violence, and social unrest. Our witnessing authoritarian, nationalist populism played out in politics worldwide is, to Mishra, not only predictable but also a kind of reckoning because some ultimately naïve political and economic promises of the Enlightenment remain unfulfilled. And yet, the devil is in the details. Even if all Western capitalist democracies are being swept along in the same direction by a historical current, each country has its unique story that explains where it ultimately washes ashore. This is particularly true for the United States.

Especially since the advent of private, cable news networks and the rapidly growing influence of social media – trends originally set in the U.S. – politics is increasingly political theater or spectacle rather than a forum for addressing social issues.<sup>1</sup> The narrative being peddled, and a citizen's identity with one or more competing narratives, has become more important than their interest in solving very real problems or even support for a working form of democracy.

I have argued elsewhere (Bullock 2022) that people finally understand themselves and the world through a shared cultural story: *what* historical and cultural information various social groups use to construct the story they live in matters profoundly. Mishra's framework, for example, gives us a story about why we find ourselves in a time where “negative solidarities” among groups are driving hatred and violence around the globe. I maintain that the most useful way to make sense of what we are experiencing is to draw upon an analysis of narrative: here, how U.S. Americans explain themselves to themselves.

### Mishra, Anger and Hatred

Mishra disputes as myth the narrative that liberal modernism has mostly proceeded peacefully in the West. He contends our current “crisis of democracy” has been brewing since the eighteenth century, when new and powerful forms of *liberalism* took hold. While Enlightenment thinkers began to peddle a historically radical ideology focused on universal, individual human rights – including the entitlement of common people to happiness and personal fulfillment – a new class of industrial capitalists simultaneously began to preach the power of mass production to supply common people with a wealth of material goods. In short, what we're experiencing now is effectively the

---

<sup>1</sup> Prophetically, Neil Postman wrote about the U.S., “Our politics, religion, news [...] have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death” (Postman 1985, 3-4).

result of the failure of Enlightenment liberalism to deliver the goods as promised after it was widely embraced as the way forward. Or more precisely, Mishra argues that liberalism has brought great benefits to a relative few, mostly in the West. Global capitalism has distributed its bounty in a highly unequal way, while the arrival of globalized social media has made it possible to spread, exponentially, the lifestyles and assured privileges of the “haves” along with the frustrated disillusion and disappointment of the “have-nots.”

For Mishra, what Enlightenment liberalism has bequeathed to everyone is a “culture of individualism” (Mishra 2017, 12-13), and whereas individuals bound by “negative solidarities” once could count on traditional community or family ties to absorb the shocks of modernity and technology, they now feel left behind, vulnerable, disregarded, and disaffected.

### **The Rise of Trump and Trumpism: Unremarkable and Exceptional**

Mishra’s back story is useful for analysing Trumpism: a U.S. movement representative of authoritarian populism and one already particularly disruptive to world order. His primary arguments predict what are now hallmarks of all modern, authoritarian populist movements: a story about “Us vs. Them;” losing ground to a constructed Other who must be feared, villainized, and removed in favour of “true” citizens; hatred of immigrants; wresting power from a corrupt elite and putting it back in the hands of “the people” who blame others for a list of economic, moral, or cultural grievances; and a nostalgic desire to return to a previous state of national greatness, stability, and morality (Mishra, Chapter 5; Norris and Inglehart 2019, Chapter 3). All of these are primary features of Trumpism.

Mishra’s formula helps us to see how Trump’s rise to capture America’s Republican Party is a logical apotheosis, so that Trump represents a movement that is both foreseeable and typical – just another demagogue shouting in a storm of right-wing populism. In this context, his administration’s embrace of vicious attacks by far-right nationalist groups on their own democratic governments, their national institutions, and their fellow citizens are neither sudden nor random. Rather than confounding, they are instead inevitable.

And yet, Trumpism is a unique form of populism: not just because of Trump’s singular personality, but primarily because of America’s particular history of racism, its two-party political system, its gun culture, the primacy of religion in fighting the culture wars over national identity, and foremost, moving the dialog on the right into a “post-factual” era.<sup>2</sup> The last point requires an ethnographic analysis of what anthropologist Carol McGranahan (2019) dubbed Trump’s “archive of lies.” In fact, Trumpism *requires* Trump’s daily production of lies and hateful comments, often celebrated by his supporters: both for defending a favoured, largely false narrative and for bullying detractors.

---

<sup>2</sup> For an overview, see Bullock 2021.

## The Narrative of Trumpism

### *Economic vs. Moral and Cultural Grievances*

Mishra's paradigm stresses resentment that stems from the unequal rewards received by populist supporters. There's plenty of evidence that Trump's base represents the economically disaffected and those who feel, with some justification, that they have been ignored and left behind by a globalized economy.

Trumpers are more likely to be older, white, male, from rural areas, and identify as conservative Christians (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 258). Since globalization moved many of their jobs overseas, with a corresponding decline in labor unions, Trumpers and their families have struggled for decades with a loss of income, opportunities, and self-esteem – many live in communities suffering steady decline and the loss of life from an unprecedented opioid crisis. It is easy to understand how Trump's rhetoric about being their champion and his slogan "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) would resonate. But it is also clear that this explanation of economic grievances does not begin to explain Trumpism or the extraordinary loyalty of Trumpers. Prevailing evidence strongly suggests that economic grievances are far outweighed by moral and cultural ones.

Actually, Trumpism coincides with improving conditions for most people in the U.S., including in many rural areas. Therefore, we must consider the appeal of Trump's populism even when the economy and the government are reasonably functional, and people's prospects are not bleak. Posing the question of why so many Trump supporters vote against their economic self-interest overemphasizes rational individualism; tribalism and national identity provide better frameworks for the answers. Political wisdom holds that winning elections is about jobs. Nationalist populism is not about jobs but rather preserving a cherished cultural identity, one where America is predominantly a White and Christian nation, one destined for greatness (see, for example, Denker 2019). Trumpers perceive their constructed nation is under existential threat because they have been steadily radicalized by vested interests to do so. That is another important part of the story.

### *White Identity Politics: Us vs. Them and Hatred of The Other*

Ashley Jardina's book *White Identity Politics* (2019) best sorts out the complexities of white identity and its connection to Trumpism. Among her important findings are that Trumpers score high on the centrality of: whiteness; an identity associated with Evangelical and conservative Christianity; being Republican; distinguishing non-whites from "true" Americans; racist and anti-immigrant views; and authoritarian values (like strong leaders and order) (for example, see Jardina 2019, 172-4). If we apply these findings, Trump's "Make America Great Again" easily translates into "Make America White Again." Importantly for his base, as explained below, it also translates into "Make America Christian Again."

Jardina observes that higher investment in white identity is specifically and statistically correlated with out-group hate and negative feelings for, or agreement about, the inferiority of "[...] blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Muslims," and even with *positive* attitudes toward creating a White History Month and the KKK (a notorious white supremacy group dating back to the days after the emancipation of enslaved Blacks) (Jardina 2019, 80-1).

White nationalists have long been working overtime to “mainstream” racist and anti-immigrant views, and Trump’s ascendancy has aided these efforts. Jardina reports that Jared Taylor, an influential editor for a white nationalist magazine called *American Renaissance* participated in a robocall to voters in early state primaries for the 2016 election that Trump won: “We don’t need Muslims. We need smart, educated white people who will assimilate to our *culture*. Vote Trump” (Jardina 2019, 276). And she quotes David Duke, former KKK leader: “the fact that Donald Trump’s doing so well, it proves that I’m winning. I am winning” (Jardina 2019, 276). During a presidential debate, Trump urged the Proud Boys (a gun-toting, violent far-right nationalist group who were repeatedly haranguing Black Lives Matter protesters) to “stand back and stand by;” this same group was later a prominent part of organizing and participating in the January 6 Capitol riots. And in 2017, Trump set off a firestorm when he said there were “fine people on both sides” regarding a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, after a white supremacist drove his car into a crowd and killed a counterdemonstrator (Ellis 2020, n.p.).

A very similar set of findings comes from extensive research by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart in *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (2019). Their theory argues that authoritarianism is not an individual personality trait, but rather certain values embedded within a group culture. The reason Trump was so successful in exploiting cultural divisions is *because* the gradual process of U.S. cultural change toward liberal and post-materialist values had finally reached a tipping point by 2016. Again, to his followers it doesn’t matter how much Trump lies: he affectively “provides emotional support when he expresses racist, ethnocentric, homophobic, and xenophobic views that transgress politically correct language, and outrages liberals” (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 340).

Populist figures tend to be charismatic mavericks with a large media presence and a penchant for bullying competitors: as star and producer of the popular “reality” show *The Apprentice*, Trump successfully built his public persona along these lines. Norris and Inglehart find strong evidence that such *populist* leaders have contributed to a decline in support for democratization worldwide since 2005, and they report a “Trump effect” for the U.S.: by 2017, compared to 96% of Democrats, only 80% of Republicans supported democratic governance (down from 88% in 2006) (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 423).

#### *Trumpism: Hate Speech and Hate Tolerance*

Hate crimes under Trump’s presidency surged nearly 20% (Villarreal 2020, n.p.). There are volumes of hate speech by supporters against constructed enemies of Trump’s movement, but here I’ll concentrate only on selected illustrations of verified statements from Trump himself. In trying to sort out Trump’s “archive of lies,” we should draw a distinction between *extreme speech* and *hate speech*. Trump lying about the size of his crowds for his inauguration and 2018 State of the Union Address (biggest ever!) is extreme but not hate speech (McGranahan 2019, 3170). Also, Trump is a master of walking up to the line of hate speech and inferring the rest, of legitimizing or augmenting the hate speech of others – what we might call hate tolerance. To the delight of supporters, he bullies anyone who challenges him, starting with his tagging them with a hateful nickname that comes straight out of grade school. Since what follows impugns the character and status of entire groups or nations, it undoubtedly qualifies as

hate speech,<sup>3</sup> by which Trump both authenticates and normalizes the hatred and suspicion of others among his loyalists.

*Hate speech: Immigration and Race*

Let's start with the fact that, in the post 9/11 era of Islamophobia, Trump rose to prominence as a potential presidential candidate by spreading the lie that Barack Obama was a Muslim born in Africa. According to Bergen (2019), without evidence Trump falsely claimed to have watched "thousands" of Muslims cheering the 9/11 attacks from their rooftops in New Jersey (Bergen 2019, 20). In 2015, about 60% of Republicans polled negative views of Muslims and half believed that Obama was a Muslim. When in 2015, Trump suggests a complete and total ban on Muslim immigration, his campaign manager said, "We wanted none of the other candidates to move to the right of us on immigration" (Bergen 2019, 22). And, as President, Trump did eventually initiate a travel ban on Muslims.

His promise to build a wall along the southern border of the US was a major campaign rallying point and eventual policy. During the campaign, Trump assailed the character of U.S. District Judge Gonzalo Curiel, who was hearing a class action case against Trump's now-discredited Trump University. Curiel is a native-born Hispanic American from Indiana, but Trump asserted, "He's a Mexican ... We're building a wall between here and Mexico ... he is giving us very unfair rulings – rulings that people can't even believe" (Rosenberg 2018, n.p.).

He said of Columba Bush, a Mexican American philanthropist and spouse of his political rival, "Jeb Bush has to like the Mexican illegals because of his wife" (Kruse 2015, n.p.).

Infamously, Trump said of Mexico: "They are not our friend, believe me... When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending the best. They're sending people that have lots of problems and they're bringing those problems. They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime. They're rapists and some, I assume, are good people" (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 354).

He is quoted as saying Haitian immigrants "all have AIDS," Nigerians in the U.S. "would never go back to their huts," and "Laziness is a trait in blacks" (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 187).

At a Campaign rally in Minnesota, President Trump invoked eugenics, saying to white supporters, "You have good genes, you know that, right? ... A lot of it is about the genes, isn't it, don't you believe? ... You have good genes in Minnesota." Minnesota is 80% white but has the highest number of refugees per capita of any State (Ellis 2020, n.p.).

In 2020, after the violent death of George Floyd, an African American, by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, there were nationwide protests, largely led by people of color and organizations like Black Lives Matter. Here is Trump's tweet:

I can't stand back & watch this happen to a great American City, Minneapolis. A total lack of leadership. Either the very weak Radical Left Mayor, Jacob Frey, get [sic] his act together and bring the City under control, or I will send in the

---

<sup>3</sup> For detailed definitions of hate speech and its relevance to my arguments here, see Brown 2015; Heinze 2016; Pérez-Escobar and Noguera-Vivo 2021; and Waldron 2014.

National Guard & get the job done right. These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won't let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank you!<sup>4</sup>

In the days following Trump's post, on Facebook there was a five-fold increase in violence reports, hate speech tripled, and reports of false news on the platform doubled. Some of those comments included calls to "start shooting these thugs."

*Hate speech: Gender*

It is typical that Trump's statements reflect admiration for a strong, hetero, highly sexed male who is in control of women, and many classify as pure misogyny. The hateful comments that follow<sup>5</sup> are typical but also notable for being directed at feminists, liberals, and women of color:

From a secret video recording, 2005: "I'm automatically attracted to beautiful women – I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. When you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything."

On the #MeToo movement: "You've got to deny, deny... push back on these women. If you admit to anything and any culpability, then you're dead. ... You've got to be strong. You've got to be aggressive. You've got to push back hard. You've got to deny anything that's said about you. Never admit."

About Carly Fiorina, his one-time Republican rival, 2015: "Look at that face. Would anyone vote for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next president? I mean, she's a woman, and I'm not supposed to say bad things, but really, folks, come on. Are we serious?"

About black Vice President Kamala Harris: "You know what, people don't like her. Nobody likes her. She could never be the first woman president. She could never be. That would be an insult to our country."<sup>6</sup>

About Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: "This is not even a smart person, other than she's got a good line of stuff. I mean, she goes out and she yaps."

About Arianna Huffington: "Unattractive both inside and out. I fully understand why her former husband left her for a man — he made a good decision."

After tough questioning during a debate by former Fox News host Megyn Kelly: "She gets out and she starts asking me all sorts of ridiculous questions. You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever."

After MSNBC anchor and "Morning Joe" co-host Mika Brezinski criticized him: "I heard poorly rated @Morning\_Joe speaks badly of me (don't watch anymore). Then how come low I.Q. Crazy Mika, along with Psycho Joe, came to Mar-a-Lago 3 nights in

---

<sup>4</sup> Tweet and following statistics from Seitz 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Most of these comments are logged by Schwartz 2024; see also Nelson 2016 and BBC 2016.

<sup>6</sup> The supreme irony of this comment is that, since August 2024, Kamala Harris is the 2024 Democratic presidential candidate who is now leading Trump in several political polls.

a row around New Year's Eve, and insisted on joining me. She was bleeding badly from a face-lift. I said no!"

After criticism from Rosie O'Donnell: "If I were running *The View*, I'd fire Rosie O'Donnell. I mean, I'd look at her right in that fat, ugly face of hers, I'd say, 'Rosie, you're fired.'"

After criticism from Jewish performer Bette Midler: "While @BetteMidler is an extremely unattractive woman, I refuse to say that because I always insist on being politically correct."

Speaking about political rival Hillary Clinton at a 2016 rally in North Carolina: "Hillary wants to abolish, essentially abolish, the second amendment [the right to have a gun] ... if she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks. Although the second amendment people, maybe there is, I don't know."

And finally, "If Hillary Clinton can't satisfy her husband, what makes her think she can satisfy America?"

#### *Hate speech: The Press, Science and Factual Truth*

Trump is famous for encouraging his supporters not to believe whatever news or information comes from traditional news outlets, preferring to suggest as "trustworthy" only conservative news programming (like Fox), and he routinely labels investigative journalism as "fake news" from the liberal, "lame stream" media. This goes beyond challenging or reinterpreting stories he does not like by instead calling into question the free press, a pillar of a healthy democracy. His followers, and other authoritarian leaders around the world, have begun habitually dismissing unflattering, factual stories as "fake news."

Trump routinely attacked and insulted reporters in the few press conferences that he offered early in his presidency, and then he began to offer none at all, preferring the safety of one-way communication through social media – an unprecedented Presidential behavior (McGranahan 2019).

Trump's most disturbing legacy is to dismiss scientific findings and factual truth as a matter of belief, and he has emboldened his followers to do the same. This is arguably the most dangerous of all forms of hate speech, for it robs the opportunity for any rational debate or for seeking a shared story grounded in a common reality – especially problematic when we consider the stakes for real and shared existential problems, like global pandemics and climate change.

In *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, Hedges (2006) brought attention to how conservative Christians, now Trump's base, were increasingly driving "non-reality-based" political movements founded on beliefs and propaganda: "When facts are treated as if they were opinions, when there is no universal standard by which to determine truth in law, in science, in scholarship, or in the reporting of events of the day, the world becomes a place where lies become true [...] people can believe what they want [...]" (Hedges 2006, 115).

About this aspect of Trump's hate speech, Norris and Inglehart write: "Populism rejects the legitimacy of authority derived from scientific evidence, book learning, and reasoned deliberation. Instead, the discourse celebrates the authenticity of direct experience ("Believe me"), mass opinions ("Many people say..."), and quick applause lines ("Build the Wall)" (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 67).



As an example, Trump said, “it’s an amazing thing” that the coronavirus “affects virtually nobody” a few hours before the United States officially surpassed two hundred thousand deaths from the pandemic (Forgey 2020, n.p.).

He said that climate change was nonexistent, and also that it would just “start getting cooler, just you watch;” when told that the science does not agree with him, he said that the science is wrong: “I don’t think science knows, actually” (BBC 2020, n.p.). He claimed “The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive” (Kruse 2015, n.p.).

As with assaulting the press, attacking established scientific evidence and factual truth is a feature of non-democratic, totalitarian regimes, consistent with a principle that Hannah Arendt calls “nihilistic relativism,”:

Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations. The force possessed by totalitarian propaganda [...] lies in its ability to shut the masses off from the real world. (Arendt 1979, 353)

### **White *Christian* Identity Politics: Holy Cultural Crusaders**

Behind all modern populist movements is a call to war. Again, for most Trump supporters, the culture wars are not just about preserving or promoting a White nation, but a White *Christian* nation, one chosen by God to advance their version of Christianity in the world (for example, see Fea 2018). Central to their identity is that of a *holy* cultural warrior. The Republican party began actively courting conservative Christians decades ago, and now it is necessary to placate them for Republicans to stay in power.

Republican strategists have successfully coupled fighting Democrats with God’s calling, so that the culture wars are melded to the greater religious war of God’s Kingdom against the triumph of liberal secularism. For many, the right-wing label “patriot” simultaneously signifies a place in *God’s* army – i.e., modern-day Crusaders against creeping secularism, sacred warriors fighting for America as a (White) Christian nation (Bullock 2022). Approximately 74-88% of Christian nationalists are white evangelical Protestants, and among evangelical Protestants, 80% agree with Christian nationalism (Cooper-White 2023).

Pamela Cooper-White (2023) captures this ethos:

the conflation of “God, guns, and guts” [...] means [...] here are only good guys and bad guys, and when the fight is on (whether it is to “stop the steal,” or to “take America back for God”), there is no middle ground. As Trump famously exhorted the crowd on 6 January, “If you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.” (Cooper-White 2023, 292)

Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI 2023) released results from a highly respected national survey on Feb. 8, 2023, just two years after the infamous January 6 Capitol riots. It measures support for Christian nationalism and demonstrates the intergroup overlap already mentioned: Republican voters were nearly four times more likely than Democrats to support the idea of a White Christian nation, laws and

priorities. Asked whether “discrimination against white Americans has become as big a problem as discrimination against black Americans and other minorities,” 85% of Christian nationalist adherents agreed, compared with 41% of all those surveyed. Asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement “immigrants are invading our country and replacing our cultural and ethnic background,” 81% of Christian nationalist adherents agreed.<sup>7</sup>

### **U.S. Political Polarization and Christian Nationalism**

Unlike European parliamentary states, the US two party political system – where the winner takes all – is a recipe for polarization once norms of civility and bipartisan cooperation break down. With its electoral college system – where essentially the states elect the president rather than individuals – only a few “battle ground” states more evenly split between the parties become the center of every long campaign season, raising the stakes and the negative rhetoric. Both of the last two Republican presidents, including Trump, lost the popular vote.

Today’s Republican party that sustains Trump is effectively a Christian Nationalist party. Trump is not the cause but the result of a slow, calculated takeover of the Republican party by the conservative Christian right (see Edsall 2023). Because majority parties have the power to draw political districts, conservative Christian candidates have successfully challenged traditional Republican incumbents in safe districts, meaning those where there is no viable opposition. The recent election of Republican Mike Johnson to Speaker of the House of Representatives is a major signal that the Christian right, with Trump, largely “own” the party. Not only is Johnson an unapologetic White Christian Nationalist, but he is also a prominent election denier who filed a case before the U.S. Supreme Court to rule on the “fraudulent” election results of Trump’s 2020 loss.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2023) assert that since the 2020 election, and in fear of Trump’s populist base, Republican leaders have enabled authoritarianism in major ways: by refusing to accept Trump’s election loss (85% of Republican representatives either publicly expressed doubt about its legitimacy or did not publicly recognize that Mr. Biden won). The election denialism, in lock step with Trump’s alternative universe, contributed to the unprecedented violent attack on the U.S. Capitol building during the Jan. 6 riot after Trump appeared at a “stop the steal” rally and encouraged his supporters to “fight like hell” to overturn the election results. Even after all that, nearly two-thirds of House Republicans voted against certifying the results (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023).

### **Trumpism and Social Media (the new universal consciousness)**

Let’s acknowledge that for the general populace everywhere, 24-hour television news cycles and social media now occupy a defining role that literature and newspapers once did: functional literacy and education not required! From Fox media mogul Rupert Murdoch and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook to billionaire Elon Musk, the new owner of Twitter (renamed X) who describes himself as a “free speech absolutist,” – these have become arguably the most influential people in the world. Even Trump’s influence has

---

<sup>7</sup> As they basically campaign to convert the US into a theocratic oligarchy, it is ironic that Christian right Islamophobes thoroughly mimic the terrorists they abhor.

been significantly tied first to Twitter's kicking him off the platform for incendiary lies, and then to the restoration of his account by Elon Musk.

Whatever its benefits, the power of social media to spread false, hateful narratives, quickly and anonymously, is largely responsible for Trumpism. McGranahan states, "The normalization of extreme speech, hate speech, and racist speech is the history of the present in the United States" (McGranahan 2019, 3176). She contends that Trump's presidency represents a new era of racism, disconnection, and a dangerous weaponization of social media to breach norms of community and communication.

Trump's lies and his spreading falsehoods for truths – by comparison to any contemporary politician – are noteworthy for their content, scope, scale, and frequency. Trump's Twitter account, from 2009 to April 10, 2019, issued over 41,000 tweets and had 60 million followers. In his first year in office, he was responsible for issuing over 2,000 false claims (McGranahan 2019, 3166, 3170-1). McGranahan says, "Trump is expected to lie, to alter the facts, to present known falsehoods for truths, and to use extreme speech as a prelude to political policy" (McGranahan 2019, 3166).

When Trump falsely states that "three out of four domestic terrorists in the United States are foreign born," this has the force of truth for many of his supporters, who then act on them (McGranahan 2019, 3166, 3170-1). Even after derogatory "Muslim" videos he retweeted were called out as essentially fake, his then Press Secretary suggested that anyway "the threat is real" (McGranahan 2019, 3173). Trumpers see defending Trump as their way of signaling and defending their values. Asserting their political, racial, and religious affiliations against a "hostile" and "immoral secular left" is a sacred duty combined with an endorsement.

After meeting with several U.S. senators where he referred to El Salvador, Haiti, and several African nations as "shithole countries" and asked why instead we couldn't get more immigrants from Norway, it resulted in swell of anti-racist comments on social media. But then began a battle of hateful replies from supporters defending him. Despite all evidence from eyewitnesses, and in Orwellian fashion, Trump later denied he had ever said this (McGranahan 2019, 3173-4).

What does a history constructed from lies and hate look like? McGranahan suggests Holocaust denial, but we could as easily substitute climate denial, or fact denial.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Prolific lying and bullying was a trademark of Trump's personality long before he became a political candidate – it is his brand. Trump now lies and spews hateful rhetoric to motivate his supporters, but it is primarily to receive their affirmation and adulation. As one pundit put it, "As a man whose lifestyle is more closely aligned with hedonism than with Christianity, Trump clearly sees white evangelicals as a means to an end, people to be used, suckers to be played. He had absolutely no interest in evangelicals before his entry into politics and he will have absolutely no interest in them after his exit" (Peter Wehner, quoted in Edsall 2023, n.p.). Similarly, he has used the Republican Party – and their polarizing issues that peddle fear – for self-aggrandizement, having changed many times his own political affiliation and his position on some of those same issues, such as abortion rights.

But likewise, Trump has been used by the Republican party, white supremacists, and white Christian nationalists to mainstream and amplify their ideas in a way that

would have been unthinkable even a few years ago. Culture wars are the current recipe for political gain. Trump has been enabled to lie and breach political and cultural norms by the Republican party – first to hold onto their power, and then because no one who opposed him was willing to challenge him for fear of upsetting his loyalists. In that sense Trump’s claim that the Republican party is now *his* party is no lie. Proof enough is that Mr. Trump, having previously been impeached twice for misconduct, convicted of numerous felonies, and currently facing dozens of criminal charges across multiple trials, easily garnered the Republican nomination for the 2024 presidential election.

It is fair to say that Republican politicians have grabbed a tiger by the tail. They cannot control Trump and they dare not let go. Republicanism is now inextricably linked to the normalization of hatred and fear that Trump’s base believes in. The party is currently damaged and deeply divided, with moderate Republicans like Mitt Romney leaving the party while those on the extreme right, including White Christian nationalists like Mike Johnson, are gaining ground. It is curious that those who preach morals and traditional values are leading a morally bankrupt party, where the litmus test for a “true” Republican (or a “true patriot”) is unwavering support for Mr. Trump, including his Big Lie that he actually won the 2020 presidential election. For Trump, the story is about validation of his ego and his false, alternative world, but for his supporters it is about the reification of a national and cultural identity. As much as Trump represents a larger-than-life character, Trumpism is much larger than Trump himself. The real trouble with Trumpism is that it will survive Trump, whatever his legal and political fortunes, because it is now a dominant cultural narrative.

Behind the racist and anti-immigrant views expressed by White nationalists is the perceived threat of replacement by non-Whites and foreigners. While there is little evidence that immigrants are taking jobs from “true” Americans, as the Trump narrative goes, there is the demographic certainty that the U.S. will become a “majority minority” country by the 2040s, meaning that Whites will no longer be the majority of U.S. citizens. This points to a U.S. that will ultimately emerge as a nation identified with the counternarrative Trump loyalists hate: a multi-racial, multi-ethnoreligious, and increasingly secular country.<sup>8</sup> There is nothing, short of extreme violence and losing the rule of law, that will change this. But here is a real concern for U.S. democracy and democratic nations everywhere: Trumpism increasingly represents a willingness to replace inclusive and universal rights born of The Enlightenment with authoritarian rule and violence against fellow citizens. And if that comes to pass in the U.S., given Trump’s own description of what he plans to do if given a second term, then other authoritarian leaders who already mimic Trump will surely follow suit. The world will likely go through a period of chaos.

Is it too simple to say that the 2024 U.S. presidential election represents two very distinct and contrasting narratives about the national identity and vision for the future? I contend that it’s simple enough and the contrast couldn’t be more striking. One narrative features fear, hatred, and cynicism toward reconstructing a more exclusive identity prioritizing favored groups, while the other presents a more inclusive, pluralist identity toward a brighter future for all. In this sense, the 2024 presidential election is arguably the most important in U.S. history.

---

<sup>8</sup> This pluralist national identity was conspicuously embodied by the August 2024 Democratic Convention that enthusiastically supported Kamala Harris, a woman of color, as its presidential nominee.

As to the ultimate fate of Donald Trump, who continues to play the leading role in an alternative conservative, white, Christian story of a past, present, and future America, let us anchor some optimism in a likelihood that the U.S. will retain rule of law, and in a maxim from the ancient Stoic voice of Heraclitus: "Character is destiny."

## Works Cited

- Arendt, Hannah. 1979. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego: Harcourt.
- BBC. 2016. "US election: Full transcript of Donald Trump's obscene videotape." *BBC News*. October 9. <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37595321> Accessed May 23, 2024.
- BBC. 2020. "US West Coast fires: I don't think science knows about climate, says Trump." *BBC News*. September 15. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54144651> Accessed May 23, 2024.
- Bergen, Peter. 2019. *Trump and His Generals: The Cost of Chaos*. London: Penguin Press.
- Brown, Alex. 2015. *Hate Speech Law: A Philosophical Examination*. New York: Routledge.
- Bullock, Brad. 2022. "Anger and Identity in The Divided States of America." *Anglistica* 25 (2): 117-30.
- Bullock, Brad. 2021. "A Postnormal Election in Postnormal Times." *World Futures* 78: 87-100.
- Cooper-White, Pamela. 2023. "'God, Guns, and Guts': Christian Nationalism from a Psychoanalytic Perspective." *Religions* 14 (3): 292. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/3/292#fn001-religions-14-00292>
- Denker, Angela. 2019. *Red State Christians: A Journey into White Christian Nationalism and the Wreckage It Leaves Behind*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Edsall, Thomas. 2023. "'The Embodiment of White Christian Nationalism in a Tailored Suit.'" *New York Times*. November 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/01/opinion/mike-johnson-christian-nationalism-speaker.html> Accessed May 23, 2024.
- Ellis, Niquel Terry. 2020. "'Stand back and stand by': Rhetoric some call racist has marked Trump's entire presidency." *USA Today*. October 13. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/10/13/hate-speech-common-theme-trumps-presidency/5873238002/> Accessed May 23, 2024.
- Fea, John. 2018. *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing.
- Forgey, Quint. 2020. "'It affects virtually nobody': Trump downplays virus threat to young people." *Politico*. September 22. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/22/trump-downplays-coronavirus-threat-young-people-419883> Accessed May 23, 2024.
- Hedges, Chris. 2006. *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*. New York: Free Press.
- Heinze, Eric. 2016. *Hate Speech and Democratic Citizenship*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Jardina, Ashley. 2019. *White Identity Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Kruse, Michael. 2015. "The 199 Most Donald Trump Things Donald Trump Has Ever Said." *Politico*. August 14. <https://apnews.com/article/the-facebook-papers-trump-george-floyd-hate-speech-violence-b0f6f26f3fdf889c090703cc2fa8dce0> Accessed May 23, 2024.
- Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2023. "Democracy's Assassins Always Have Accomplices." *New York Times*. September 8. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/opinion/trump-republicans-spain-brazil.html> Accessed May 23, 2024.
- McGranahan, Carol. 2019. "A Presidential Archive of Lies: Racism, Twitter, and a History of the Present." *International Journal of Communication* 13: 3164-82.
- Mishra, Pankaj. 2017. *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Nelson, Louis. 2016. "Trump in trouble over 'Second Amendment' remark." *Politico*. August 9. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/trump-clinton-second-amendment-judges-guns-226833> Accessed May 23, 2024.
- Norris, Pippa and Ronald Inglehart. 2019. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pérez-Escobar, Marta and José Manuel Noguera-Vivo (eds.). 2021. *Hate speech and Polarization in Participatory Society*. New York: Routledge.
- Postman, Neil. 1985. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Viking.
- PRRI. 2023. "A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture." *PRRI*. February 8. <https://www.prii.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/> Accessed May 23, 2024.
- Rosenberg, Eli. 2018. "The judge Trump disparaged as 'Mexican' will preside over an important border wall case." *The Washington Post*. February 5. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/02/05/the-judge-trump-disparaged-as-mexican-will-preside-over-an-important-border-wall-case/> Accessed May 23, 2024.
- Schwartz, Rafi. 2024. "69 things Donald Trump has said about women." *The Week*. January 22. <https://theweek.com/donald-trump/655770/61-things-donald-trump-has-said-about-women> Accessed on May 23, 2024.
- Seitz, Amanda. 2021. "America 'on fire': Facebook watched as Trump ignited hate." *Associated Press*. October 28. <https://apnews.com/article/the-facebook-papers-trump-george-floyd-hate-speech-violence-b0f6f26f3fdf889c090703cc2fa8dce0> Accessed May 23, 2024.
- Waldron, Jeremy. 2014. *The Harm in Hate Speech*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Villarreal, Daniel. 2020. "Hate Crimes Under Trump Surged Nearly 20 Percent Says FBI Report." *Newsweek*. November 16. <https://www.newsweek.com/hate-crimes-under-trump-surged-nearly-20-percent-says-fbi-report-1547870> Accessed May 23, 2024.