

# Fair Observer

Monthly



January 2021

Fair Observer<sup>®</sup>

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# Fair Observer Monthly



January 2021

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International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

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# ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a nonprofit media organization that engages in citizen journalism and civic education.

Our digital media platform has more than 2,500 contributors from 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

Our education arm runs training programs on subjects such as digital media, writing and more. In particular, we inspire young people around the world to be more engaged citizens and to participate in a global discourse.

As a nonprofit, we are free from owners and advertisers. When there are six jobs in public relations for every job in journalism, we rely on your donations to achieve our mission.

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## Ethiopia's Heavy Hand in Tigray Sends a Message

Corrado Cok  
January 5, 2021

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**The Tigray crisis has shown that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed will no longer tolerate direct challenges to his leadership or to Ethiopia's unity.**

**T**he crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray region has come to an end — at least on the surface. In November 2020, the Ethiopian National Defense Force quickly recaptured all urban areas in Tigray with the support of the Amhara Fano militia and the Eritrean military. Although the parties avoided major confrontation, the military operation left hundreds of casualties on the ground and displaced an estimated 1 million people across the region, with over 50,000 refugees crossing the border to Sudan.

In the meantime, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) leadership went underground, probably in the remote mountains of Tigray. Despite the initial bravado, the TPLF was unable to conduct guerrilla warfare against the Ethiopian forces, finding itself encircled and losing a considerable portion of its military assets. The TPLF's very survival will depend on popular support, which, in turn, will depend on how the Ethiopian authorities are going to handle the Tigray region and its civilian population in the foreseeable future. The situation on the ground convinced Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to declare the mission accomplished.

The heavy hand adopted against the TPLF sent a strong message in multiple directions. Domestically, it targeted Abiy's Oromo and Amhara allies, but also the movements that currently defy the federal government across Ethiopia. Externally, the prime minister made it clear that the Tigray crisis was essentially a domestic issue, signaling to friends and foes that

neither the country's unity nor is his vision of an Ethiopia-centered regional order is under question. But why was such message deemed necessary in Addis Ababa and what impact did it have?

### A System Under Strain

The label of "African Yugoslavia" has been hanging over Ethiopia for quite some time. Both states have enshrined a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society reflected in a federal constitutional system. Both countries have been ruled by a strong single party that initially controlled the political system from the center but subsequently gave way to regional, ethno-nationalist components. This shift eventually caused the violent break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. In today's Ethiopia, strong party leadership might ensure a different outcome.

Since Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018, some events made observers doubt his ability to carry out his reform program and keep Ethiopia's federation together. In June 2019, an attempted coup orchestrated by the head of the Amhara security forces led to a series of clashes between the Ethiopian army and groups of Amhara rebels. In August 2019, violent protests broke out in Hawassa as local ethnic movements demanded the formation of their own state in the south. On June 29, the killing of a famous Oromo singer sparked widespread riots in Oromia, while a series of ethnic-based murders further inflamed the political climate across the country.

Then came the constitutional quarrel with the TPLF. Back in June, Addis Ababa indeterminably postponed parliamentary elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The move was criticized by all opposition parties, yet only the TPLF defied the federal government and organized local elections, resulting in a relatively high turnout in support of the Tigrayan leadership. The situation spiraled out of control amid reciprocal accusations of illegitimacy. Ultimately, the TPLF attacked the bases of the Northern Command of the Ethiopian army on the night of November 3. Abiy's response was swift

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and resolute, sending a convincing message regarding the state of the federation and his personal leadership.

The operation targeted the main rival of Abiy's political project. The Tigrayans bore the brunt of the war against Eritrea and Ethiopia's Derg regime despite being a small minority in the country. When it came to power in 1991, the TPLF managed to design an ethnic federation and dominate it for nearly 30 years. This was made possible through a careful political strategy that pitted the Oromo and the Amhara, the two major ethnic groups, against one another.

After his appointment as prime minister, Abiy heralded a new course for Ethiopia based on the unity between the Amhara and Oromo elites within his Prosperity Party. Along with his allies, he began to sideline the Tigray leadership through economic reforms and judicial prosecutions against security officers. This included an array of privatizations of Tigray-dominated public companies and tighter controls over financial flows that curtailed Tigrayan leaders' grip on the Ethiopian economy. Now, by squashing the TPLF, the prime minister has killed two birds with one stone, eliminating his main domestic opposition and boosting unity among his allies.

### **The View from Outside**

Prime Minister Abiy managed to convey a strong message abroad as well. Its first recipients have been Ethiopia's neighbors in the Horn of Africa. The heavy hand in Tigray signaled that Ethiopia's internal divisions did not affect the Addis Ababa-centered regional order currently under construction. When he came to power, Abiy understood that his country needed stability around its enormous borders in order to prosper and shield its periphery from instability. This is the reason why he developed strong relations with his Sudanese counterpart, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, and, most notably, with Ethiopia's traditional foes: Eritrea and the Somali federal government.

The peace with Asmara, in particular, which won Abiy the Nobel Prize in 2019, marked a revolution in Ethiopian foreign policy. One of Addis Ababa's key priorities is access to the Red Sea, a lack of which has made land-locked Ethiopia overly dependent on neighboring Djibouti. The main obstacle to the Asmara-Addis Ababa relations was once again the Tigrayans, Eritrea's traditional enemies. Consequently, the operation against the TPLF will help consolidate the partnership between Prime Minister Abiy and Eritrea's President Isaias Afewerki.

One collateral victim of the Tigray crisis is the African Union (AU). The Addis Ababa-based organization has become a recognized peacemaker across the continent, as witnessed in Somalia and Sudan. Last year, the Ethiopian prime minister was praised by the AU as an example of African leadership and empowerment. In turn, he demanded the union's intervention in the mediation over Ethiopia's dispute with Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). While Abiy accepted to meet with AU's envoys, he made it clear that the Tigray crisis was a domestic issue. This approach undermined the AU's peacemaking role by revealing that its efficacy is limited to small or failed states while it exerts very little influence over large African nations.

Finally, the message targets friends and foes in the Middle East, where all the regional powerhouses, especially in the Gulf, have stakes in the Horn of Africa. The United Arab Emirates has launched numerous investment projects in Ethiopia and opened a military base in Eritrea. The Tigray crisis represents a direct threat to its interests in the region and possibly provided a reason for alleged air support for the Ethiopian military operation, coupled with calls for mediation.

Cairo was also closely monitoring the operation in Tigray. With Ethiopia's dam project threatening Egypt's water security, Cairo has considered all options, including military ones, as was echoed by US President Donald Trump during a phone call with Abdalla Hamdok and



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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In addition, there were allegations suggesting Egyptian support for anti-government riots that swept Oromia in the summer. The Tigray crisis could have looked like another opportunity to weaken Addis Ababa as part of the complex chess game around the GERD. But by swiftly suppressing the TPLF insurgency, Abiy eliminated a potential back door for any external power to exert pressure over his government.

Although the TPLF has never posed a serious military threat to the federal army, the impact of the Tigray conflict on the future of Ethiopia is unquestionable. It laid bare the weaknesses of the country's ethno-federal system and its propensity for crisis. At the same time, it convinced the prime minister to embrace a tougher approach to domestic challenges. The heavy hand used against the TPLF has delivered a powerful message aimed at consolidating the Amhara-Oromo partnership within the Prosperity Party and drew a red line for other opposition parties that may have considered defying Addis Ababa. Likewise, the military operation signaled to external actors that Ethiopia's position in the region and beyond is not under discussion.

Whether this new approach to Ethiopian politics will suffice to keep the federation together is yet to be seen. But the Tigray crisis has shown that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed will no longer tolerate direct challenges to his leadership or to Ethiopia's unity.

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## **How Do You Tell an Authoritarian From a Fascist These Days?**

Alessio Scopelliti, James F. Downes & Valerio Alfonso Bruno

January 7, 2021

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**In the 21st century, the line between fascism and authoritarian populism is becoming increasingly blurred.**

**R**ecent developments in global politics, such as Donald Trump's reelection campaign or the rise of illiberal democracies across Central and Eastern Europe, have arguably led to a misinterpretation of what many refer to as a "return of fascism." Although authoritarian populism shares numerous similarities with fascism, these two ideologies differ markedly, both in terms of their ideological nature and of their danger, as well as the very real challenges that they pose to liberal democracies in the 21st century.

The term "fascism" is a complex ideological label that has found historical prominence in both 20th century Italy and in Nazi Germany between the two world wars. The concept is currently applied broadly in academic literature to identify radical-right political parties, right-wing authoritarian (or military) regimes or even movements sympathetic to fascism. However, the term is more properly used when referring to the ideology that was promoted and implemented by Benito Mussolini in Italy in the interwar period.

### **Fascism Versus Authoritarianism**

Historically, fascism derives its roots from nationalism, totalitarianism and the myth of violence. Firstly, through the advent of nationalism, fascism does not only try to achieve ethnic homogeneity of the members of the community but also introduces the concept of national superiority over other peoples and nations.

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Secondly, to comprehend totalitarianism, it is necessary to keep in mind the impact of the Great War and the depersonalization of the individual. For fascism, an individual is a “tool” used to pursue the interests of the state, which coincide directly with the interests of the fascist party. However, fascism is not limited solely to obedience, as has been shown, among others, by Hannah Arendt. It claims legitimacy by obtaining the consent of the masses and, to accomplish this, fascism as an ideology is mobilized and tends to encompass all sectors of society. As the self-styled Italian philosopher Giovanni Gentile remarked, “for fascism everything is in the state and nothing is outside the state, in this sense the state is totalitarian.”

Finally, the myth of violence is one of the most important tenets of fascism. Enemies are everywhere, and fascism must assert itself through violence (extreme, if necessary). This pattern inevitably undermines any forms of pluralism. For this reason, for fascist ideologues, this eventual clash is inevitable, and, eventually, all the principles of both liberal democracy and representative institutions fall.

In defining authoritarian populism, we can refer to the “fourth wave” in the radical-right literature as outlined by Cas Mudde. Mudde argues that there are three core patterns that make up this ideology, comprising nativism, authoritarianism and populism.

Firstly, nativism refers to the “membership” of the nation, which is determined by ethnic terms. This notion is also related to the exclusionary pattern of radical-right parties that tend to argue that multiculturalism should be considered as a threat to the national heritage and cultural traditions. Consequently, the state should impede access to those immigrants who differ from the majoritarian ethnic group; or, alternatively, immigrants should entirely adopt the national culture and fully assimilate.

Secondly, authoritarianism refers to what extent a society should be strictly controlled by the state in order to maintain security and order within the borders of the country. This pattern is

linked to the strong emphasis on law and order which “is directed not only against external threats (immigrants and asylum seekers) and criminal elements, but also against its critics and political opponents.”

Finally, the notion of populism refers to the well-known definition of conflict within current societies, between the people (represented by the radical right) and the elite (mainstream politicians and the political establishment).

### **The Cult of the Leader**

It is clear from the above analysis that fascism and authoritarian populism are different, ideologically speaking. Nonetheless, there are two elements that are significantly comparable in both ideologies. The first is the cult of the leader, or fanaticism. The fascist leader isn’t just someone to obey or support, but also serves as an image in which the electorate can feel represented. This image is one that is omnipotent and omniscient. For example, Mussolini was portrayed as a hero in all fields — “a hard worker, an athlete, an airplane pilot” and so on — in order to create a cult of personality.

A similar cult of personality was also portrayed in Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler, via the Führerprinzip — the leader principle. In this regard, US President Donald Trump also (indirectly) reminds us of this type of leader. Trump often boasts of his “unlimited” knowledge and unprecedented achievement in various fields, from science and defense to economics and race relations.

Trump also speaks through his body. For example, after the first presidential debate against former Vice-President Joe Biden, President Trump was diagnosed with COVID-19. Once recovered, he staged a dramatic return to the White House to demonstrate strength in having defeated the virus and being immune from it. A not too dissimilar scene also played out in Brazil, with President Jair Bolsonaro also contracting COVID-19 but dismissing it as nothing more than an ordinary bout of flu.

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In both fascism and authoritarian populist ideologies, the leader is presented as an invincible figure that most of the times is described (most often by the state propaganda machine) as the savior of the homeland from ruin. So, Mussolini should have restored the ancient splendor of the Roman Empire, while Trump was supposed to “Make America Great Again.”

### **Creation of the Enemy**

The second analogy is the creation of an enemy. Recalling how fascism was founded on the myth of violence, conflict does not take place only on ethnic or religious, but also on political grounds. Thus, anybody who represents a danger to the stability of the fascist authority in the country should be eliminated (for the good of the nation itself).

As the Soviet author Vassily Grossman explains in his famous 1970 novel “Everything Flows,” the “scalpel is the great theorist, the philosophical leader of the twentieth century.” With this image, Grossman exemplifies how totalitarianism (including fascism) envisaged a certain political project — founded on purely abstract ideological principles applied in the real world — and everything that is not included in this project must be eliminated and overthrown.

Fascism does not foresee discussions or compromises with the other side. In this same regard, even authoritarian populism does not offer dialogue to the opposition, since its *raison d’être* is to interpret society as a Manichean conflict between “the pure people versus the corrupt elite,” which does not include dialogue between these “two homogeneous and antagonistic groups.”

For example, during his 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump declared several times that he would have Hillary Clinton jailed and later accusing former President Barack Obama of “some terrible things” that “should never be allowed to happen in our country again.” This is an example of how Trump, an authoritarian populist leader, identifies the political counterpart

as an enemy, thereby leaving no space for discussion or disagreements. Scholars such as Matthew Feldman, the director of the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, have even recently remarked about the fascist ideological nature of President Trump. Recent events in the United States, such as yesterday’s storming of the US Capitol in Washington, DC, by pro-Trump rioters hoping to overturn the election result, give rise to fears about a neo-fascist wave.

### **Ideological Differences**

Although fascism and authoritarian populism share two important ideological features, it might be easy to forget that fascism was, on the one hand, a conservative militia with the goal of subduing communist mass strikes of workers and peasants. On the other hand, it was born as a revolutionary movement. Indeed, the main historical goal of fascism was to overthrow the modern state “with its connotations of industrialism, individualism and bourgeois values.”

Put simply, the project of fascism was to reject liberal democracy, political pluralism and the market economy. Authoritarian populism’s aim is not to overthrow the democratic regime — instead, it is a part of the democratic system. Even though authoritarian populist leaders can achieve political power in government, they are not immune from the overall democratic process, especially when they lose power. President Trump’s loss in the 2020 US election, despite his claims of voter fraud, demonstrates this fact.

The year 2020 will surely be remembered for the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on globalized societies. During the first wave of the pandemic, national governments called for nationwide solidarity, and many succeeded in achieving it. At the same time, the past year may have ushered in authoritarian populism as the new *zeitgeist* of the next decade: The long-term impact of COVID-19 may benefit radical-right parties as the second wave of the pandemic wave has caused an even longer period of economic and social deprivations.

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Authoritarian populism may play a legitimatizing role in democratic regimes, and it is important to note that this ideology has become increasingly mainstreamed and normalized. While authoritarian populists should not be defined as fascists if they do not abolish democratic institutions, this normalization process represents the main threat to liberal societies across the globe in the 21st century.

In contrast to neo-fascist movements, which are significantly opposed to democracy, the leaders of authoritarian populist movements are allowed to participate in the democratic game, to fuel protests politics among citizens and to capitalize on these in order to achieve power. Donald Trump's insistence that the election was stolen from him to spur his supporters to disrupt the certification of Joe Biden's victory has left four dead. As the world watched an "insurrection incited by the president" at the heart of the world's oldest democracy, it is clear that the line between fascism and authoritarian populism is becoming increasingly blurred.

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## A Perspective on America's Imperfect Democracy

Gary Grappo  
January 11, 2021

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**In view of so many imperfections manifested throughout its history, America looks less like the "shining city on a hill" than a shadowy ghetto of hypocrisy.**

It is a well-established fact that America, as it approaches its 245th birthday, is a divided nation. Red versus blue, conservative versus liberal, right versus left, black versus white, rich versus (a growing number of) poor, urban versus rural. Further divisions may be drawn along education, religion, class, gender identity, ethnicity, language of origin and other descriptors.

It was all on technicolor display on January 6, the day when both the US Senate and the House of Representatives were due to certify the results of the 2020 presidential election as required under the US Constitution. The world watched as Americans, so passionately aligned with President Donald Trump and so convinced that the election had been stolen from him, determined to disrupt, if not destroy, the most sacred core of the country's democratic system, the Congress.

It was a horrifying and tragic example of democracy run amuck. What took place on Capitol Hill that day was everything the framers of the Constitution and the Founding Fathers sought to prevent. In fact, the rioters' actions by no definition can be remotely described as democratic. They were purposefully dangerous and, as facts come to light, intended to inflict violence. It was mob rule. Insurrection. Rebellion. Sedition. It represented the abandonment of democracy and descent into anarchy.

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## Compared to What?

But before America's critics, doubters, adversaries and enemies pronounce the country's or its democracy's last rites, they may wish to consult history. They may wish to reflect on the many other occasions when the world's oldest democracy turned away from its constitution, its values, principles and its own laws. How does January 6 then compare?

How does it compare with more than 250 years of legalized slavery that only a bloody, four-year civil war could end? Or to another 150 years of Jim Crow and segregation? Of course, there were also the more than 120 unspeakable incidents of mass violence committed against the country's black citizens, including the Slave Revolt in the Cherokee Nation of 1842, the New York Draft Riots of 1863, Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, Rosewood Massacre of 1923, Charlestown Church Massacre of 2015 and the Black Lives Matter demonstrations of last summer, on top of the 3,400-plus lynchings of black Americans in the period after the Civil War until well into the civil rights era.

And would January 6 look more uncivil and unconstitutional than the systematic theft of Native American lands in violation of all the treaties signed by them with the US government and often their forced removal from those lands? These date back to the nation's independence and continue to this day.

To add tragic irony to those two sets of gross injustice, consider that substantial numbers of black and Native Americans fought valiantly to defend the very country and democracy that treated them as second-class citizens and often worse. At the start of World War II, the US government ordered Japanese Americans rounded up and confined in internment camps for the duration of the war. They committed no crime. They were given no trial. Yet despite the violation of their constitutional rights, 33,000 of the sons, husbands and brothers of those held in the internment camps volunteered to fight for the United States in the war, including 18,000 in the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a highly

decorated all-Japanese-American Army unit led by white officers.

There is also the country's long history of denial of rights to and prejudice against other ethnic and religious groups, including Irish, Germans, Italians, Jews, Catholics, Chinese, Vietnamese, Muslims, Hispanics and other people of color. They learned that the Constitution and the Bill of Rights did not always apply to them. Furthermore, when they may have belatedly come to be accepted, restitution has rarely been offered.

How does all this compare with January 6, however despicable and detestable that event may have been? In view of these and so many other imperfections manifested throughout its history, America looks less like the "shining city on a hill" than a shadowy ghetto of hypocrisy. January 6 is just one more example and maybe not the most egregious.

## No Auto-Pilot in Democracy

Yet the nation's founders understood that the republic they were creating was an experiment. It was one based on the consent of the governed, a novel concept for the mid-18th century. They likely saw that a nation as large and diverse as it was in 1776 would only become larger and more diverse with time. The truly remarkable risk they took, however, was betting on the idea that the Constitution and a set of laws could define and unify a nation, as opposed to race, religion or language — another first in human history.

Since then, tens of millions of immigrants have risked their lives and futures, and those of their descendants, on the same idea. And new risk-takers continue to do so today. Last Wednesday and the annals of American history suggest that that idea is sometimes a mere aspiration. But it appears to be one with an irresistible attraction.

It should be no surprise that a man-made system, whatever its noble aspirations and claims to righteousness, might fall short from time to time, or even a lot. It is, after all, a nation of human beings prone to imperfection, individually

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and collectively. America has no special claim on perfection.

Moreover, a system as fragile as democracy requires constant maintenance and vigilance. It is never self-sustaining. Institutions and, most importantly, the people must attend, defend, revise, perfect and strengthen it continually. Citizens of courage may be called upon from time to time to make heroic acts and sacrifice to defend it. There is no auto-pilot in a democracy.

Those who participated in last week's anarchy lost sight of America's democracy. They cast aside a system purposely designed, however imperfectly, to allow for change, in exchange for change by violence. They failed. Despite the mob's violent rampage, the House and the Senate returned to their chambers that same evening and proceeded to exercise their constitutional duty to certify the election of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as the next president and vice-president of the United States. There would be no Reichstag fire in the United States in 2021.

Moreover, almost lost amidst all the noise of these events, just one day before, voters in Georgia, the heartland of the old Confederacy, elected, for the first time, a black man and a Jew to represent the state in the US Senate. Georgians showed up in record numbers at the polls or through mail-in ballots to express the "consent of the governed." Voting officials and volunteers diligently managed the entire process without incident so that the voices of the people of Georgia would be heard and counted. The quiet courage of citizens attending to their democracy stifled the mob violence at the US Capitol.

January 6 surely should be a day that no American or citizen of any democracy should ever forget. It is a starkly painful reminder of human weakness and the fragility of democracy. Clearly, Americans should consider speaking more humbly of their "model" democracy. Their country is living proof that even after nearly 250 years, their experiment is still very much a work in progress.

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## **2021 Is the Year to Make Peace With Our Planet**

Deborah Brosnan  
January 12, 2021

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**Even if we declare a truce today and start to live more sustainably, it will take decades, if not centuries, for Earth to recover.**

**I**t's time we all make peace with our planet — you and me, parents, professionals, leaders and the upcoming generation. All of us have to make 2021 the Year of Peace. Here's why: We're at war with our planet. Even if we declare a truce today and start to live more sustainably, it will take decades, if not centuries, for Earth to recover.

COVID-19, now responsible for nearly 2 million deaths worldwide, emerged because of habitat encroachment and destruction. Meanwhile, the last decade was the hottest on record, while events like hurricanes and raging wildfires increased in frequency and intensity because of climate change. Air pollution now kills 9 million people every year. The concrete, metal, plastic, bricks and asphalt we produce now weighs more than all living things on our planet.

In our oceans, two-thirds of commercially harvested fish species are overexploited. By 2030, there will be more plastic than fish in the sea. Coastlines are eroding, and cities are sinking as sea levels rise. Mangroves and reefs that ordinarily protect them are either being cut down or are dying from climate-induced changes like rising sea temperatures. Because of the greenhouse gasses pouring into the atmosphere

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every day, our planet is heading for a 3°C to 5°C rise in global temperatures that will wreak havoc on our health, wealth and world.

Living out of balance with the environment is culminating in a pressing existential crisis. Instead, imagine waking up every morning in 2021 with the intention to make peace with the planet. Each of us can be the change we need by pushing our leaders in the public and private sectors to be better stewards of the Earth. With that in mind, here's my New Year's resolution. These are the four actions I will ardently advocate leaders take to help us all make peace.

### **Go Green**

Investing in green infrastructure can solve our energy and infrastructure needs while restoring biodiversity, which has suffered over recent decades. Nature-based solutions such as using dunes and marshes to protect our coastlines shield us equally or better than sea walls. Simultaneously, these can help us meet Paris Climate Agreement targets by reducing global atmospheric carbon emissions by up to one-third. It is cheaper to build a renewable energy power plant than it is to operate an old coal one. We won't just see benefits for our health and environment. Such investments come with substantial financial opportunities. The UN estimates that green technologies can create at least 18 million jobs worldwide.

### **Pay Your Fair Share**

We need to connect global finance with climate risks. 2021 will be an excellent year for financial markets to finally start aligning investments with their actual costs and benefits to people and the planet. Companies across the globe will soon be required to disclose their climate risks to the public. It starts on the London Stock Exchange in January 2021. In March, the EU's new disclosure regulations on sustainability come into force. The incoming US administration is heading in the same direction.

I say put the costs of planetary destruction and pollution where it belongs — on those who cause

it. To get out ahead of what's assuredly coming, companies should start the new year by investing in climate risk disclosures and environmental, social and corporate governance actions. For those who don't proactively get on board with this movement, 2021 and 2022 could prove to be a tougher slog than it needs to be.

### **Be Nicer to Your Neighbors**

We share this planet with a rich tapestry of wildlife. But biodiversity is in crisis, and we need to help. We can do this by increasing the number and size of nature reserves, helping endangered species recover and by supporting sustainable nature-based livelihoods like fishing and forestry. The good news is that these kinds of investments do double duty by combating climate change while bolstering species. For instance, forest restoration helps reduce carbon emissions: A single tree can sequester 4 kilograms of carbon annually.

Our human neighbors could use some similar kindness. Low-lying island nations are bearing the brunt of climate change, and some are sinking before our eyes. Yet less developed countries have few resources to meet these challenges, and adaptation funding only makes up 20% of all climate funding. Even in the most advanced nations, we choose to leave many communities behind. Social equity and environmental justice must be part of our New Year's resolution.

### **Lose the Excess Carbon Weight**

2021 is an ideal year to lose those atmospheric carbon dioxide love handles. To get on that diet, nations must agree on a timeframe and plan to become carbon neutral. The UK, China and several other countries have already made the pledge, but this has to be an all-in agreement. Our ability to create viable COVID-19 vaccines in less than a year should give us confidence that, once we put our minds to it, we can find workable solutions to our energy and societal needs that don't require us to burden the planet with more CO2 pollution.

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There are many ways business leaders and governments can make peace with the planet in 2021. But there's also plenty we can do as individuals. I intend to make peace with the planet by choosing wise and compassionate actions, from how I spend money to which places I visit and what leaders and causes I support. Aligning action with intent will build inner peace and a better world. Peace, after all, comes with choosing to do what is right.

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## **Brexit Trade Deal Brings Temporary, If Not Lasting, Relief**

Paul Hardy & Daniel Jones  
January 13, 2021

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**The trade deal signed by the United Kingdom and the European Union means short-term relief but longer-term uncertainty for business.**

“**W**hat we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning.” So said Ursula van der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, announcing the completion of Brexit negotiations on Christmas Eve, quoting from T.S. Eliot's “Little Gidding,” the final quartet of his last great poem. Van der Leyen's words perfectly capture the defining trait of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA): It is a platform for further ambition in cross-border partnership between the UK and EU rather than a ceiling on current ambitions.

Relief was the predominant emotion amongst the business community on both sides of the Channel before the New Year. Now that the dust has settled and attention has turned to the detail of the deal reached, there should be no illusions that the TCA ends EU-UK negotiations. We set out below what, in high-level terms, the TCA means for EU-UK trade in goods and services, and where there are gaps to fill and questions to still be answered over the coming months and years.

### **What Does the TCA Mean for Trade in Goods?**

Firstly, the good news. Under the TCA, there are no tariffs or quotas on cross-border trade in qualifying goods between the United Kingdom and the European Union. In this regard, the TCA goes further than any EU trade agreement negotiated with a third country. This is a hugely positive outcome for businesses with UK and EU supply chains, particularly in sectors such as the automotive and agri-food industries, where tariffs imposed on so-called World Trade Organization terms under a no-deal Brexit would have been high.

However, it is crucial for those involved in cross-border trade to appreciate that only goods that are of EU or UK origin benefit from zero tariffs and zero quotas under the TCA. Rules of origin are a key component of every trade agreement and determine the “economic nationality” of products. Under the TCA, a product will attract a tariff if a certain percentage (beyond a “tolerance level”) of its pre-finished value or components are not of either UK or EU origin. The tolerance levels vary from product to product and require careful analysis. Therefore, businesses will need to understand the originating status of all the goods they trade between the UK and the EU to ensure they benefit from the zero tariffs and quotas under the agreement. Businesses will also need to ensure that their supply chains understand the new self-certification procedures to prove the origin of goods.



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Beyond the qualified good news on tariffs and quotas, the deal is less helpful in that full regulatory approvals are required for goods being imported into the EU from the UK and vice versa. While in certain important sectors (automotive, chemicals and pharmaceuticals) the UK and the EU agreed on specific rules to reduce technical barriers to trade, the UK government did not achieve its longstanding negotiating objective of securing broad mutual recognition on product standards.

Therefore, from January 1, 2021, all products exported from the EU to the UK will have to comply with the UK's technical regulations and will be subject to any applicable regulatory compliance checks and controls. Similarly, all products imported from the UK to the EU will need to comply with EU technical regulations and will be subject to all applicable regulatory compliance obligations, checks and controls.

There will also be specific changes to food and plant safety standards under the TCA. UK agri-food exporters will have to meet all EU sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) import requirements with immediate effect. In this sector, UK exports will be subject to official controls carried out by member state authorities at border control posts. Similarly, EU agri-food exporters will have to meet all UK SPS import requirements, following certain phase-in periods the UK government has provided.

Far from being a “bonfire of red tape” promised by certain advocates of Brexit before the 2016 referendum, the TCA introduces a “bonanza of new red tape” for businesses who wish to sell their products in both UK and EU markets. On January 8, UK Cabinet Office minister, Michael Gove, acknowledged that there would be “significant additional disruption” at UK borders over the coming weeks as a result of customs changes and regulatory checks.

### **What Does the TCA Mean for Trade in Services?**

As has been widely noted by commentators, the deal on services is far thinner than on goods.

More than 40% of the UK's exports to the EU are services, and the sector accounts for around 80% of the UK's economic activity. As an inevitable consequence of leaving the EU single market, UK service suppliers will lose their automatic right to offer services across the union. UK business will have to comply with a patchwork of complex host-country rules which vary from country to country and may need to establish themselves in the EU to continue operating. Many have already done so.

The level of market access will also depend on the way the service is supplied. There are four “modes” for this. Services can be supplied on a cross-border basis from the home country of the supplier, for example over the internet; to the consumer in the country of the supplier, such as a tourist traveling abroad and purchasing services; via a locally-established enterprise owned by the foreign service supplier; or through the temporary presence in the territory of another country by a service supplier who is a natural person.

All of this means that UK-established businesses will need to look at domestic regulations on service access in each EU member state in which they seek to operate, and vice versa for EU-established businesses seeking market access in the UK.

### **A Basis for Ongoing Negotiations**

The TCA does not mark the end of EU-UK negotiations, and in some areas these discussions start immediately. For example, the agreement has provided an end to so-called passporting of financial services under which banks, insurers and other financial service firms authorized in the UK had automatic right to access EU markets and vice versa.

The EU and the UK have committed to agree on a memorandum of understanding that will establish a framework of regulatory cooperation in financial services by March this year. With an end to passporting, it is likely that there will be more friction in cross-border financial services, but the extent of that friction depends on the

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outcome of future negotiations between EU and UK governments and regulators.

To take another example of importance to the UK economy, the TCA does not provide for the automatic mutual recognition of professional qualifications. As of January 1, UK nationals, irrespective of where they acquired their qualifications, and EU citizens with qualifications acquired in the UK, will need to have their qualifications recognized in the relevant EU member state on the basis of that state's domestic rules. However, the TCA leaves the door open for the EU and the UK to agree on additional arrangements in the future for the mutual recognition of qualifications, something that professional bodies will be pushing for immediately.

Whilst there has been understandable relief from politicians, businesses and populations on both sides of the Channel suffering from Brexit fatigue that a deal — any deal — has been reached, the sheer extent to which the TCA envisages ongoing negotiations between the UK and the EU on issues both large and small over the months and years ahead has not been widely appreciated.

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## Navigating the Minefield of Arab Politics

Munir Saeed  
January 14, 2021

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**Despite modern geopolitical realities, changing alliances and reconciliation summits, the real underlying reasons for disputes in the Middle East have not yet been resolved.**

In November 2020, the Saudi Association of Senior Scholars, a government-directed mouthpiece on religious affairs, issued a fatwa (religious edict) declaring the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. In the fatwa, the scholars stated, among other reasons, that the Brotherhood seeks to “contest the ruler and deviate from the ruler” — a crime punishable by death in Saudi Arabia. The scholars' edict, however, ignored the right of people, under Islamic law, to stand up against an unjust ruler.

In 2013, Egypt's first and only democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, a card-carrying member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was overthrown by a coup that reinstated the military junta. In the days that followed, Egypt saw a bloody purge of the Muslim Brotherhood, with thousands of its members killed. Today, tens of thousands continue to languish in jail without trial.

In 2015, the United Arab Emirates declared the Brotherhood a terrorist organization, jailing without trial anyone suspected of membership or having sympathies with the Muslim Brothers. According to Wikileaks, Frances Fragos Townsend, assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism, reported that during a 2006 meeting, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed “claimed that if elections were held in Dubai ‘tomorrow’ he thought the Muslim Brotherhood would win.”

Accusing Doha of giving asylum to and funding the Muslim Brotherhood, in 2017, Egypt,

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the UAE and Saudi Arabia, together with Bahrain, broke diplomatic relations. The so-called quartet then imposed a blockade on Qatar and even attempted a military invasion, which was only halted when Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan rapidly deployed a military force to Qatar.

### **Incoherence of the Incoherent**

The Muslim Brotherhood, established in 1928, is older than all of the regimes fighting over it. It had reached power in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere only through the ballot box. Like most political parties that mix their political ideology with religion, it has lost the support, if not the respect, of those who, like this author, believe the two don't mix.

But here is the mother of all Arab political ironies. For example, in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been carrying out brutal airstrikes for the past six years that have killed more than 200,000 people, ostensibly to reinstate the "internationally recognized" president overthrown by Ansar Allah (Partisans of God, as the Houthi rebels are officially known). The Muslim Brotherhood is not only an active member of the Saudi-UAE military campaign, but also part of the internationally recognized Yemeni government that the Saudi and UAE alliance is bombing Yemen in order to reinstate. Did you get that? Ibn Rushd (or Averroes, as he is known by his Latin name) would have called this murkiness the "incoherence of the incoherent."

If that is not bizarre enough for you, here is another one. The Muslim Brothers, recently outlawed as terrorists in Saudi Arabia, are still given political asylum, protection and funding by Riyadh as allies in the war in Yemen. Many of their leaders live in Saudi Arabia. You couldn't make this up if you were the greatest fiction writer.

But the anti-Muslim Brotherhood, anti-Qatar and anti-Turkey brigade is crumbling. The Arab quartet is losing its American ally in the face of President Donald Trump and is not sure what to

expect from the incoming Biden administration. Meanwhile, Iran continues to be as formidable and as unyielding as ever. And so, in true Arab form, alliances must change — again.

The UAE and Bahrain recently formalized and made public their long-standing secret relations with Israel, seeking to create a protective buffer against Iran and any potential challenges from the new administration in Washington. Alas, Saudi Arabia, a self-proclaimed custodian of the Muslim holy sites, cannot be so open about its own secret relations with Israel and is even less confident about the changes afoot in the United States. Instead, it called for reconciliation with the other side, Qatar, and made similar moves toward Turkey — both supporters of the Muslim Brothers and vehemently at odds with the UAE, Saudi Arabia's ally against the Brothers.

### **Hasty Reconciliation**

In a recent hastily-called reconciliation summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), under the watchful eyes of President Trump's trusted son-in-law Jared Kushner (in typical monarchical style), the anti-Qatar coalition signed an agreement that said, "let bygones be bygones." The Saudi foreign minister described the reconciliation as "due to the wisdom of the GCC rulers and Egypt, it is a complete turn of the page on all points of dispute." So, the 13 points brought against Qatar as non-negotiable conditions for reconciliation have been turned.

In fact, to indicate the uncompromising nature of the quartet's demands, the UAE's foreign minister, Anwar Mohammed Gargash, on May 1, 2018, tweeted: "A sincere advice intended to bring Qatar out of her crisis. There will be no gulf mediation. No pressures will be beneficial. And your media will not change your status. Go back to your wisdom, for your crisis continues. Manage your affairs from today with wisdom. And negotiate within the perimeters of your neighbors who express real concerns." No wonder that, commenting on the reconciliation agreement, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was quick to congratulate Qatar for

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“the success of its brave resistance to pressure & extortion.”

Despite the dramatic welcome that Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman gave to the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim ibn Hamad Al Thani, followed by a tour of the desert driven by the crown prince himself, the summit spoke more of divergence than unity. It left no doubt about its real purpose, at least from the Saudi and American perspectives. Bin Salman lost no time bringing to focus the elephant in the room, Iran. His message was clear: This is a reconciliation between brothers to wage war on a neighbor. The summit’s fault lines have been widened.

Qatar still maintains strong relations with Iran. While it seems highly unlikely that even the Trump administration, with all its faults, will be crazy enough to attack Iran and start a regional war that will make the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq pale by comparison, the fear is that Israel might do so and force Washington’s hand. Should that happen, any future US attack on Iran using its Qatar-based Al Udeid Air Base will result in destructive retaliation on Qatar. Iran had strongly warned all its neighbors that attacks carried out from their soil will be retaliated against (on their soil). The Iranian foreign minister described it as “an all-out war.”

Qatar’s vulnerability is made worse by its break with its neighbors, leaving it to face any possible Iranian retaliation alone. Whether the reconciliation summit is intended to assure or to fool Qatar into breaking away from Tehran, despite Iran’s support during the quartet’s blockade, is an open question. Whether Qatar will fall for that is also an open question. The Prophet Muhammad had warned that “A faithful is not stung twice from the same burrow.”

On a visit to Doha during the blockade, a Qatari official told me that in his view, reconciliation will ultimately happen. Pointing out the foolishness of the ongoing blockade, he insisted that Doha will not be imprudent enough to trust the quartet with its fate. Having opened

new pathways beyond the GCC, he saw this crisis as an important lesson — never again.

### **Old Rivalries**

The above view is supported by regional history, of which the Qataris are mindful. In ancient times, the desert tribes of Arabia fought over water wells. While water scarcity will continue to be a cause of wars in the region, the GCC has now moved on to geopolitical fights reflecting the skyscraper nation-states mushrooming out of the desert oil wealth.

However, despite modern geopolitical realities, changing alliances and desert reconciliation summits, the real underlying reasons for the dispute between Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain — old tribal rivalries — have not yet been resolved. In fact, these are virtually impossible to resolve without dismantling the monarchies. The Nahyans of Abu Dhabi, now led by Mohammed bin Zayed, see mainly Qatar, but also Bahrain, as mini-states that escaped the UAE federation and must be brought in, willingly or by force. As far back as 1867, Bahrain’s Al Khalifa rulers and the Abu Dhabi Nahyan tribe allied to attack Qatar’s Al Thani tribe to undo its newly formed state.

Even the GCC, which was created as an organization of independent sovereign states, has not removed the old tribal mentalities among its members. The Al Khalifas of Bahrain — from whom the Saudis forcefully took the whole of its oil-rich Shia-populated eastern region, historically part of Greater Bahrain — reject Qatar’s legitimacy. The Al Khalifas ruled Qatar before the Al Thani tribe broke away from the territory that is now Saudi Arabia and created its own state. The Saudis see Qatar as a wayward artificial state that should have never existed in the first place. They consider it part of Saudi Arabia. These underlying tribal rivalries endure and play a major role in how current relations are managed, becoming even more prominent since the Arab Spring.

Qatar, together with Turkey, supported the uprisings against the military dictatorships that

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ruled Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria. Qatar's very vocal Al Jazeera news network was the voice of Arab Street during the uprisings. Qatar funded a lot of the youth programs, many of which were either led or at least infiltrated by the Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, fearing that a successful Arab Spring revolution that brings an accountable transparent political process will infect their own populations, took the opposing side, spending billions to arm and support the military dictatorships against the uprising.

Having given up on the UAE and bin Zayed personally (who is seen in the West as an Arab visionary despite the failures of all his costly foreign adventures), Saudi Arabia and Egypt have started to make overtures to Turkey, the regional power that has defeated Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE — plus Russia and France — in Libya and then also defeated the latter two in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh at the end of last year.

Reconciling with Qatar leaves the UAE and Bahrain isolated. However, the extent to which Mohammed bin Zayed can rely on Bahrain, effectively ruled and kept alive by the Saudis, is highly debatable. Debatable too is how useful Bahrain can be for the crown prince, beyond sharing a table to sign a “normalization” deal with Israel.

In Yemen, the UAE escaped Ansar Allah's retaliatory missiles that hit Saudi Arabia, mainly as a result of shaky deals it has made with the rebels. A live-and-let-live policy accompanied by ransom payments has enabled the UAE-Israeli alliance to focus attention on Yemen's southern ports. There's virtually no military confrontation between Sanaa and Abu Dhabi. A similar shaky deal exists with Iran, Dubai's major trading partner. However, if indeed there is a regional war, all bets are off. The shaky friendships in Yemen will transform into deadly hostilities in the Persian Gulf. No amount of double or triple play will save Mohammed bin Zayed.

Meanwhile, Iran continues to observe the changing loyalties across the waters. Iran knows

how it starts among us Arabs, how it proceeds and where it ends. It's all déjà vu. The GCC is made up of the same Arabs who first financed Saddam Hussein's attack on Iran, then opened the gates for the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq itself. And all that smoke you see above Arab skies — in Yemen, in Syria, in Iraq, in Egypt, in Libya — comes from the guns with GCC petrodollars signs all over them.

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## Angela Merkel: A Retrospective

Hans-Georg Betz  
January 21, 2021

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**Despite a vigorous 15-year resume as chancellor, it is now clear that COVID-19 will define how Angela Merkel will be judged once she leaves office.**

Americans like to rate their presidents. In fact, presidential rankings have become something of a cottage industry in political science, ever since the eminent Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. started the tradition in the late 1940s.

In Germany, we don't do that, at least not in a formal way. We do have, however, a sense of who was a good chancellor and who wasn't, and there probably is something of a common understanding as to why. Chancellors stand out if they accomplished extraordinary feats. Konrad Adenauer will always be remembered for accomplishing Franco-German reconciliation and anchoring the Federal Republic firmly in the West; Willy Brandt for initiating a radical turn in West German foreign policy toward the East,

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culminating in the reconciliation with Poland; and Helmut Kohl for seizing the historic opportunity in 1989 and bringing about the peaceful reunification of the two Germanies.

What about Angela Merkel, the first woman to hold Germany's most powerful political office? Her tenure will end in a few months' time, at the end, one hopes, of a horrific pandemic. On September 26, Germany will elect a new parliament, and Angela Merkel will retire. By then she will have been in office for more than 15 years, second only to Helmut Kohl, who managed to hold on to the office a few months longer. When Angela Merkel took over in November 2005, she was largely dismissed as "Kohl's girl" who was likely to have a hard time asserting herself in a political party, the Christian Democrats (CDU) largely dominated by men.

### **The Anti-Trump**

In fact, shortly after the election, then-chancellor Gerhard Schröder insisted on national television that there was no way that his Social Democratic Party would ever accept an offer from Angela Merkel to form a coalition with the CDU under her leadership. As it so happened, the Social Democrats did, and Schröder was finished. In the years that followed, it became increasingly clear that Merkel was quite capable of asserting herself in the treacherous waters of Berlin's political scene. In fact, in 2020, Forbes magazine ranked Angela Merkel as the most powerful woman in the world — for the 10th consecutive year.

Throughout her 15 years in office, the chancellor has, on average, received high satisfaction scores. As recently as December, more than 80% of respondents in a representative survey said that Angela Merkel was doing a good job. Appreciation for Merkel, however, has hardly been limited to Germany. In an international Pew poll from September 2020 covering 13 nations, Merkel was by far seen as the most trusted major world leader. More than three-quarters of respondents rated her positively; by contrast, more than 80% saw then-US President Donald Trump in a negative light.

Poll data also suggest that during Merkel's tenure, Germany's stature in the world has substantially increased. In a Pew study of 10 European nations from early 2019, almost 50% of respondents agreed that Germany played a more significant role in the world than a decade ago; fewer than half said the same thing about France and the UK. Germans are, for obvious historical reasons, understandably concerned about the country's international image and reputation. Not for nothing, Canada's *The Globe and Mail* referred to her in 2018 as the "anti-Trump," only to add that "We need her kind more than ever." This in itself will secure Merkel an eminent place in post-reunification German history.

Ironically enough, the article was written at a time when Merkel's star appeared to be rapidly waning, the result of serious electoral setbacks on the national and regional level. In the election to the German Bundestag in September 2017, the Christian Democrats lost more than 8 percentage points compared to the previous election, which meant a loss of 65 seats in parliament. At the same time, the radical right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered parliament, garnering more than 12% of the vote. In subsequent regional elections in Bavaria and Hesse, the Christian Democrats lost more than 10% of the vote, setting off alarm bells in Munich and Berlin.

By the end of 2018, Merkel appeared to be up against the ropes, her days numbered. Particularly the upsurge in support for the radical populist right caused alarm, particularly in Bavaria. In response, the powerful Christian Social Union (CSU), Bavaria's independent arm of the Christian Democrats, seriously contemplated once again to reach beyond Bavaria and create a genuinely national-conservative party, competing with both the AfD and the CDU. The CSU had always maintained that there must never be a democratically legitimated party to the right of the CSU. With the AfD, there clearly was, and Merkel's Christian Democrats appeared not in a position to stem the tide.

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## Corona Winner

Yet Merkel managed to survive the various challenges to her leadership, despite continued electoral setbacks, which largely benefited the AfD. But skepticism abounded. In late 2018, a majority of Germans thought that Merkel would not serve out her mandate, due to expire at the 2021 parliamentary election. At about the same time, however, 70% of respondents in a representative survey said they wished she would finish her mandate. Once the pandemic hit Germany in the spring of 2020, Merkel's stock started to soar once again. International media celebrated Germany as a most likely pandemic winner that had proven particularly resilient to the virus.

What a joke. Only this time, nobody's laughing. At the time of writing, Germany is a coronavirus disaster zone. The country has proved, once again, to be completely unprepared in the face of the second wave of infections that threatens to overwhelm the health care system. Starting in early December, Germany posted record new infections, and this before the arrival of the UK mutation. By now, the situation in some parts of Germany is nothing short of catastrophic. At the same time, the situation on the vaccination front leaves much to be desired.

In mid-January, Germany recorded more than 22,000 new infections on a single day and more than 1,100 new COVID-19-related deaths. This is at least partly the result of the German government's indecisive, hesitant and confusing response to the pandemic, made worse by Germany's federal system, which provides for a plethora of veto points. This means that not only has it been difficult and quite tedious to arrive at a coordinated policy but also that every Land introduced its own measures, some more stringent than others. The result has been a certain degree of public exasperation. In a recent survey, more than half of respondents said they were annoyed at the measures that were "often contradictory."

To be sure, Angela Merkel cannot be held personally responsible for the dramatic

deterioration of the situation once the second wave hit Germany with full force. A lot of time was lost in December in attempts to get the various political officials from Germany's 16 Länder to agree on a common strategy. And even in the face of a potential disaster in early January, Merkel had to do a lot of convincing to get support for more restrictive measures.

Under the circumstances, Angela Merkel's other accomplishments as well as her failures are bound to fall by the wayside. They shouldn't. On one hand, Angela Merkel has dragged the Christian Democrats into the 21st century. The CDU used to be the party of "Kinder, Kirche, Küche" (children, church, kitchen). Politics were a men's world for, as my neighbor, a woman, used to tell me, politics is a "dirty business" — and dirty businesses should be left to men.

Angela Merkel dared to appoint a woman to the most male of all ministerial portfolios, defense. The German armed forces did not like her, despite the fact — as even Germany's conservative flagship publication, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, has conceded — that she managed to substantially increase their budget as well as and their image. Today, that former defense minister, Ursula von der Leyen, heads the European Commission, another novum. She was replaced by another woman, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who in 2018 succeeded Angela Merkel as the head of the CDU.

Probably nothing exemplifies the cultural revolution Merkel set in motion than the question of sexual and gender identity. Those of us who grew up in the postwar period probably recall that once in a while, our parents would hint that somebody was a "175er." This was in reference to Paragraph 175 of the German criminal code according to which homosexuality was a punishable offense. The paragraph goes back all the way to 1871, establishing that any sexual activity between two males (there was no formal mention of lesbians) was subject to criminal persecution and punishment.

During the Nazi period, gays suffered from severe persecution, many of them ended up in

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concentration camps. After the war, the Federal Republic not only retained the paragraph; it also used the Nazis' "pink lists" — in the camps, homosexuals were marked by a pink triangle on their prisoners' shirts — to initiate some 100,000 proceedings against homosexuals. It was not until 1994 that the "gay paragraph" was finally abolished, not least because of East German insistence during the negotiations on reunification.

More than 20 years and many gay parades later, in 2017, the German Bundestag voted on legalizing same-sex marriage. On the occasion, Angela Merkel allowed representatives to vote their conscience rather than following party discipline. Quite a few Christian Democrats came out in the support of the law, which was passed by a substantial majority, much to the chagrin of Germany's conservatives. Some of them defected to the AfD given its vocal opposition to the law, which, as one of its leaders suggested, threatens to undermine Germany's traditional values and harm society. Polls showed, however, that a substantial majority supported the law. In June 2017, 60% of men and more than 70% of women came out in favor of same-sex marriage across Germany.

### **We Can Handle This**

Angela Merkel's resolute position during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015-16 also comes out as a positive. In order to understand the enormity of the event, it might be useful to recall one of the great *Lebenlügen* (delusions) of the Federal Republic, the notion that Germany was "not a country of immigration." Given the fact that by the 1980s, Germany was home to millions of guest workers and their families, many of whom had permanently settled in Germany, the notion ignored the reality on the ground. Yet it was not until 2001 that an expert commission of the German Bundestag came to the conclusion that the notion was "no longer tenable." By 2015, a significant majority of Germans agreed with that statement, and in 2019, more than 70% of

respondents agreed that in the future, Germany should accept as many refugees as in the past.

This is quite remarkable, given the storm Angela Merkel provoked when in 2015 she cleared the way for welcoming a million refugees, many of them from war-torn Syria. Her main argument was that Germany is a strong country: "Wir schaffen das," Merkel announced — "We can handle this." The German public was not entirely convinced. Perhaps they remembered Merkel's predecessor, Helmut Kohl, who in 1990 had promised that unification would lead to "blossoming landscapes" in the eastern part of the country. The reality, of course, was the opposite. The West German taxpayers would have to pay the bills for decades to come while in the east, resentment continued to grow only to erupt in substantial support for the AfD.

Under the circumstances, German skepticism in 2015 was quite understandable. In early 2016, around 80% of the population expressed concern that the government had lost control over the refugee situation; among AfD supporters, it was virtually 100%. As expected, the radical right made the refugee crisis the central focus of their mobilization — a winning strategy, as the party's success in subsequent elections demonstrated. But in the end, Merkel prevailed; early concerns that the refugee influx would lead to major social problems were largely proved wrong, and, in late 2018, a comfortable majority of Germany's public agreed that the chancellor had done a good job with respect to her refugee policy.

With Angela Merkel, the CDU moved to the left — or so her critics have insisted and complained. Others have argued that the left-wing turn of the CDU is largely a myth. The reality is somewhere in between. Empirical studies suggest that in the aftermath of reunification, all major German parties gradually moved to the center. With reunification, Germany added millions of citizens from a socialist regime whose value system and views on major social issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, were considerably to the left of the dominant value system that prevailed in the western part of the



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country. As a result, the conservative ideational elements in the CDU got progressively weakened, provoking vocal protest from the party's right wing. A study from 2017 (but based on interviews held before the refugee crisis of 2015) found that CDU members largely agreed. They saw their own party "distinctly to the left" of their own position and that way before Angela Merkel's now-famous "Wir schaffen das."

### **Gray Spots**

Yet against all party-internal resistance and opposition, despite calls for her to hand in her resignation, Merkel once again prevailed — a remarkable feat in these turbulent times. Future historians are likely to consider Angela Merkel's 15-year tenure in an overall positive light. To be sure, there are gray spots, such as Germany's handling of the fallout of the financial crisis of 2007-08 and, more recently, Berlin's intransigence with regard to Italian pleas for "Corona bonds" during the first wave of the pandemic.

Another gray spot regards the question of gender equality. Officially, the European Union has been committed to gender mainstreaming since the mid-1990s. More often than not, the results are wide off the mark, particularly in Germany. To be sure, even here critics would concede that Angela Merkel has "contributed fundamentally to the recognition of women as leaders and decision-makers in Germany."

In other essential areas of gender politics, her record is rather dismal. Her government did little to nothing to narrow the pay gap between men and women or to do away with Germany's "anachronistic tax system" that privileges married couples "as long as one of the two (usually the husband) has a high income and the other one (usually the wife) earns little or nothing." And actual reforms, for instance regarding child care and parental leave, were less intended to promote gender equality than to enhance the position of the family, in line with traditional Christian Democratic doctrine.

The record was equally dismal with regard to public life. As a semi-official account from late 2018 put online by the Federal Center for Political Education noted, in the course of Merkel's tenure, the number of women in her cabinets progressively declined, from 40% in her first cabinet to 30% in her fourth. At the same time, the CDU failed to attract new women members. In 2018, women made up around 25% of party ranks.

Things were not any better with respect to the composition of Germany's Bundestag. At the end of the red-Green coalition in 2005, the share of women MPs had been more than 40%. After the election of 2017, it had fallen to a bit more than 30%. In the Christian Democratic parliamentary group, women made up barely 20%. And although Angela Merkel appointed a woman as defense minister, the most important ministries — interior, foreign affairs and finance — remained firmly in the hands of men.

This was to a large extent also true for Germany's civil service. In 2020, 35% of top positions in the public sector were held by women. And, as the ministry for justice and consumer protection recently noted, "the higher up in the hierarchy, the lower the share of women." But at least here, change is underway. By 2025, all senior positions are supposed to have closed the gender gap.

### **Klimakanzlerin**

If Germany is a laggard with regard to gender equality, it has prided itself to be a leader when it comes to the environment. The reality, however, is somewhat different. In fact, when it comes to arguably the greatest global challenge, the fight against global warming and climate change, Angela Merkel has been a major disappointment.

As a reminder: Angela Merkel entered office as a strong advocate of decisive action against climate change. In fact, in the years that followed, German media nicknamed her the "Klimakanzlerin" — climate chancellor. Yet over time, she gradually abandoned her convictions, caving in first to the demands of German's

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powerful automobile sector and then to the coal industry. Germany continues to rely heavily on coal for the production of energy. To a significant extent, it is the environmentally most disastrous type of coal, lignite.

Lignite power plants are among Europe's worst polluters. Most of them operate in Germany and Poland. And while a number of EU countries, such as France, Italy and the Netherlands, have decided to stop coal-fired power production by or before 2030, Germany won't phase out its coal plants until 2038. Mining lignite is an important sector in the southeastern part of former East Germany, in Lusatia, around the city of Cottbus. Electoral considerations, particularly given the AfD's strength in that part of the country, of course have nothing to do with the Merkel government's reluctance when it comes to coal. *Honi soit qui mal y pense.*

Overall, Merkel's climate policy has been suboptimal, to put it mildly. As a former environmental minister recently put it, for the government, political opportunism and convenience counted more than tackling an essential problem. That was before the pandemic hit. COVID-19 appears to have caused somewhat of a reconversion. By now, Angela Merkel has once again started to promote herself as the Klimakanzlerin. And for good reasons. COVID-19 has largely been associated with environmental destruction, the dramatic loss of biodiversity and global warming. Polls show that Germans are quite sensitive when it comes to these issues. A recent survey found around 85% of the German population not only concerned about these issues, but also willing to make lifestyle changes to "protect the climate." Under the circumstances, Merkel's return to her environmentalist roots is hardly surprising. It makes a lot of sense, politically speaking.

Despite a vigorous 15-year resume as chancellor, it is now clear that COVID-19 will define how Angela Merkel will be judged once she leaves office and by how well Germany will master this challenge over the months to come. This might be unfair. After all, Merkel is what

Americans call a "lame duck." But, as Donald Trump so eloquently put it, it is what it is. The German government's recent frantic attempts to regain control of a situation that has largely spun out of control are an admission of unpreparedness paired with incompetence and mismanagement paired with wishful thinking. In March 2020, Angela Merkel stated on national television that COVID-19 represented the "greatest challenge since the Second World War." She was right.

As long as Merkel holds Germany's most powerful political position, she is in charge and ultimately bears responsibility. At the moment, a large majority of Germans have full confidence that once again, she will be at the top of her game and handle the challenge. It is to be hoped that their confidence is justified.

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## **Conspiracy Pushers: QAnon's Radical Unreality**

Landon Shroder  
January 25, 2021

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**Now that Biden's presidency has become a reality, the disillusionment of QAnon communities is a moot point, since reality was never the point to begin with.**

“**W**here we go one, we go all.” This tagline from the now infamous QAnon conspiracy has been seared into our hive minds since the insurrectionist events of January 6 on Capitol Hill. The question now becomes, where do Q's followers go from here? Their “coming storm” prophesied that Donald Trump would seize power, overthrow the deep state and arrest a cabal of Satan-worshipping, pedophilic

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Democrats. Luckily for everyone else, this storm was little more than an afternoon drizzle. However, the threat from these conspiracies remains.

Much has been written about the radicalization of QAnon adherents since the coup attempt, and there is an available body of work for anyone brave enough to wade into this conspiracy pool. There have also been extensive follow-up attempts to dissect the QAnon mindset since President Biden's inauguration, given Donald Trump's failure to deliver on the promises made by Q.

### **Turbulence Ahead**

While some are taking a certain satisfaction in watching the QAnon worldview crumble, the situation is poised to grow even more complex. This presents an even deeper challenge to the long-term social and political health of the United States. Observers who are commenting on the disillusionment of QAnon communities now that Biden's presidency has become a reality are missing the point, since reality was never the point to begin with. The point has always been escapism — absconding into a world of fan fiction where the entanglements of our political and economic lives can be distilled down to memes, anonymous “transmissions” and a binary choice between good and evil, filled with legions of heroes and villains. None of this will be abandoned any time soon, let alone gracefully.

Because of this, there is deep turbulence ahead, namely what to do with potentially millions of people who now adhere to an untethered ideology. These digital communities are not going to vanish, nor are they simply going to recognize the absurdity of their ways and come back to the mainstream. Doing so would undermine the investment they have made in the conspiracy that has consumed them, forcing them to acknowledge that their estrangement from family, friends and colleagues is actually of their own making. There is also another dimension, one that goes even deeper. Letting go of the conspiracy and admitting that their beliefs are

misplaced is to also acknowledge that they allowed themselves to be deceived and manipulated.

Having this expectation is a heavy lift and one that cannot be expected without programs or mechanisms that support personal disengagement. Arab countries battling extremism have pioneered these kinds of deradicalization programs and have been running them for years. Unfortunately, programs like this that are currently available in the US do not exist on the scale needed to be effective. What we are left with is much more rudimentary and reactive, allowing us to only assess the pathways these individuals are taking and how their digital communities are supporting their radicalization.

There are five main QAnon archetypes currently in play. Each has a role in either disrupting or scaling the radicalization behind the next version of the conspiracy.

The first group are those who can be reached. These will be individuals who understand they unwittingly fell into something and are looking for a way back to their lives pre-QAnon with a minimal amount of embarrassment.

The second group are those still consuming the conspiracy but who are negotiating their belief system within it as Biden settles into his presidency. The cracks have started to form for these individuals, and it could go one of two ways: Either they are reached and brought back into normative political and social life or they will evolve in the direction of the new conspiracy.

The third group are the enablers who are still committed to trafficking in conspiracy regardless of the form it might be taking. They are the content creators, communicators, logistical planners and recruiters. They have influence within their digital communities, which they will protect by espousing whatever version of the conspiracy keeps them most relevant.

The fourth group are the ideological drivers of the conspiracy, those not only with the most followers and content but those capable of articulating the most radical aspects of the

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conspiracy. Many of the previous ideological leaders of QAnon have dropped out due to a loss of legitimacy within these digital communities. But in doing so, they have left behind a vacuum. This space is now being filled by opportunists who need to make even more outlandish claims as a way of establishing their bona fides to the millions of followers looking for what comes next, accelerating the potential for radicalization.

### **Turn to Anger**

The fifth group is the most worrisome and where intelligence gatherers and federal law enforcement will need to be most focused. These are individuals who recognize the conspiracy was a lie, but still maintain all of their underlying resentments, specifically white grievance. This will turn to anger, which can be easily exploited, not just because they realize QAnon was a lie, but because they believe they were abandoned by the same politicians who told them the election was stolen. These individuals will be looking for new digital communities that are less keen on fan fiction and more prone to direct action as a way of exercising their grievances. They will be prime targets for white supremacist groups and militias who are looking to recruit, plan and engage in violent action. The recalibration of these relationships is already ongoing.

Believing the followers of QAnon have lost faith in the conspiracy in any meaningful way is naive. Their reality is flexible. Spend a few minutes in any QAnon Telegram channel, and you can see that the unreality of their beliefs is only accelerating. A new conspiracy is already claiming that Trump will become president again on March 4 under a “restored republic,” which links to a belief that the US was dissolved in the 19th century. Individuals who have retreated from normative social and political life into their conspiracy-driven digital communities will continue to find ways to thrive because they have no other choice. Their emotional investment in the conspiracy has become their personal identity. This is only going to make the

conspiracy more dangerous and the radicalization stronger.

The FBI cannot arrest its way out of this problem, nor can the tech companies be counted on to regulate their own platforms in a way that addresses the complexity of these vast challenges. While radicalization is nothing new, it is new in the American context. This is a knowledge frontier in its infancy and one we are wholly unprepared for — for all the reasons that led us to this place to begin with. If left unaddressed, we might soon find ourselves in a position where our unreality has indeed become our reality.

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## **Addressing the Fragile Limits of Female Autonomy**

Monica Weller  
January 27, 2021

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**To secure the reproductive rights of Americans and those affected by American foreign aid, the Biden administration must take action.**

**O**n October 22, 2020, the United States co-sponsored a Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women’s Health and Strengthening the Family. However, despite its name, this declaration states that “in no case should abortion be promoted as a method of family planning.” While it doesn’t legally impact access to abortion in the United States, it bars foreign aid organizations from using US global health funds to counsel women about abortion or refer them to a safe abortion provider.

This corresponds to more than \$9 billion in foreign aid and health services provided by the

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US to women's health advocacy groups, impacting issues as far-ranging as HIV, malaria and water sanitation. While the Biden administration has promised to reverse American support of this declaration, the impact from funding allocations to organizations as well as women's health during the time it's enforced will leave long-term effects.

### **Limited Access**

The Trump administration has also made gains nationally to limit women's access to reproductive health care not only by nominating Justice Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, but also by chipping away at women's access to birth control. In what became the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's last dissent, despite the reported difficulties in accessing birth control, the Supreme Court ruled 7-2 to uphold companies' right to deny insurance coverage of birth control to employees. These cases highlight the increasing barriers to reproductive health care enacted by the United States and how urgent it is for the incoming administration to prioritize access to birth control and abortion, especially amidst the ongoing pandemic.

The World Health Organization estimates that the average rate of unsafe abortion is "four times higher in countries with more restrictive laws than in countries with less restrictive laws." With the advent of COVID-19, birth control methods have become less accessible even in places where birth control should be easily available, culminating in a rise in pregnancies and, hence, the need for abortions. Due to social distancing restrictions, previously accessible clinics have shut down many services, which can make time-sensitive appointments and access to medical care nearly impossible. In one egregious case, no abortion procedures were available in South Dakota for seven months due to COVID-19, and they continue to be offered only once a month.

Further complicating the issue, women have also been more heavily impacted by job losses than men, with more than one in four women considering reducing hours or quitting their jobs

in the next year. In places like the United States, health care is largely tied to employment, meaning women have fewer affordable ways to obtain birth control, further increasing the rate of unwanted pregnancies.

While there have been efforts to bring doctors to restricted areas to perform abortions, such as flying in practitioners to the one clinic available for abortions in South Dakota or the advocacy group Women on Waves providing offshore medical assistance to women living in countries without the right to abortion, this is not a sustainable long-term option. The United States is considered a country where women have access to abortion, but in practice, access varies heavily by state.

Since 2019, when multiple anti-abortion laws were passed, five states have only one clinic offering abortions. Before that, 38 states required by law that teenagers inform their parents 24 to 48 hours prior to receiving an abortion. While many states continue to reaffirm one's right to abortion, the Trump administration's harsh criticism of abortion has further constrained the legal access to both the procedure itself and to information about reproductive health care at a national level, with the impacts of COVID-19 serving to further restrict access.

### **Alternative Approaches**

Restrictions on reproductive care are certainly not unique to the United States. Poland has been in the news recently with the introduction of legislation to ban abortion in cases of fetal defects, which would exclude nearly 98% of abortions. The new law has inspired the largest protests in the country since the 1980s pro-democracy movement. Because of the momentous backlash against the heightened restrictions, the legislation has not yet been implemented. However, the fact that increasingly severe restrictions are being introduced in countries with populist leaders reveals the fragile limits of female autonomy.

Even with the new Biden administration, restrictions on access to reproductive care and

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laws enacted will not automatically go away. Just like women in Poland, women in the United States are less likely to seek out safe measures conducted by medical practitioners with less information and greater restrictions.

The Biden administration remains limited in its options to pursue judicial or legislative success for abortions due to conservative majorities on the Supreme Court and in the Senate. However, there are several alternative approaches that the administration can pursue, even within the first 100 days. As president, Biden can reinstate Planned Parenthood and other organizations back into Title X's family-planning program. In addition, he could reduce the current restrictions on the early pregnancy termination drug mifepristone. Both of these approaches could expand access to abortion without directly interfering in states' laws and maintain some security for women if Roe v. Wade were to be partially overturned.

Access to abortion remains limited in the United States, and the strength of anti-abortion movements remains a serious concern in the US and elsewhere. Existing restrictions on abortion will not instantly disappear with the swearing-in of a new administration, nor will the additional long-term consequences caused by the coronavirus pandemic simply go away. In light of the situation, the public needs to continue being adamant in its refusal to allow governments to restrict the bodily autonomy of pregnant people lest we continue moving away from the needs and rights of those giving birth. To secure the reproductive rights of Americans and those affected by American foreign aid, the Biden administration must take action.

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## Will American Democracy Perish Like Rome's?

Atul Singh  
January 28, 2021

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**Disparity, dysfunction and discord have destroyed democracies in the past and endanger American democracy today.**

A recent cover of The Economist pictured the 46th US president, Joe Biden, in front of the White House with a cleaning mop. The lead, "Morning after in America," projects that "The outlook for America looks grim, but that could quickly change." The venerable publication proclaimed from its powerful pulpit that Biden "should stick to his folksy brand of dogged centrism which is so well suited to the moment." That gives him the "best chance of success."

The Economist sees good reasons for Biden to succeed. With interest rates so low, the government can virtually borrow for free. This means the Biden administration could roll out a \$1.9-trillion stimulus. This could fund a polio-style vaccination program, extend unemployment insurance and expand child tax benefits. An infrastructure bill and investment in clean energy to combat climate change could create new jobs for the 21st century.

The Economist's ebullient optimism might come from the fact that it has been on the winning side of history since its inception in 1843. For more than 178 years of its existence, it stood for Pax Britannica. For the last few decades, this blue-blooded British publication has pivoted to be a trumpeter of Pax Americana. This has led to errors in judgment such as its infamous support for the 2003 Iraq War.

In January this year, The Economist may be making a similar misjudgment. It is prematurely heralding America's journey to what Winston Churchill memorably termed "broad, sunlit

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uplands” by using shoddy facts and specious reasoning just as it did in 2003. Its assertion that the US banking system looks sound is not backed by evidence. Its claim that “the economic pain is not widespread” is ridiculously untrue.

### **On Capitol Hill**

On Wednesday, January 6, I read about a mob besieging Capitol Hill as I sat at my desk less than four miles away. Against the advice of my American friends, I left to see firsthand what was going on. They told me the white supremacist mob would beat me to a pulp. I ignored their advice because I was curious. I got off at the Archives metro stop and mingled with Donald Trump’s supporters. Some were heading to the Capitol, while others were walking away from it. *Prima facie*, the people walking around were not much different than at other Trump demonstrations.

Although I lost count after 23, I am sure that I spoke to more than 50 people. They were all friendly, sociable and deeply distressed. They told me repeatedly that I was the first journalist who had cared to speak with them. They said that mainstream media was filming them but did not want to listen to them. They asked me whether elections were rigged in India. When I responded that India solved the problem of rigging by creating an independent election commission, some piped in that the US should have one too. That is certainly not what I expected to hear.

To be sure, I met the saner members of the crowd, a mix of what Douglas Murray has called “the strange, the sincere, the silly and the sinister.” I stayed on Capitol Hill grounds talking to one person after another. At some point, tear gas bombs started going off on the terrace and the curfew hour started drawing nigh. I finally beat a retreat and started walking down to the L’Enfant Plaza metro station. Someone stopped me, exchanged words and offered me food. I took a sandwich, granola bars and water while declining the chips. Instead of getting beaten, I had been welcomed and even fed. Even as I sat in the metro and later worked at home, the images and

the words of the day stayed with me. Needless to say, I did not sleep well. In fact, I was so troubled that I hit writer’s block and was unable to put down my thoughts on paper coherently for days.

Even though I have long been a critic of Donald Trump, I have been cognizant of the power of his appeal. While explaining Trump’s victory in 2016, I gave facts and figures about increasing income and wealth inequality in America. I also pointed out how social mobility has been falling. For most Americans, life is tough, and prospects for their children increasingly bleak. In 2017, CNN reported that 6 in 10 Americans had savings of less than \$500. The great American dream has become a terrible American nightmare for far too many families.

Every Trump supporter I met on January 6 spoke about being left behind. One supporter claimed to be a Catholic bishop from Kentucky. He proudly posed for a photo at my request and blessed me when we parted. The bishop had done missionary work in India and had been to my ancestral hometown of Varanasi. He waxed lyrical about how the political system was broken. The man in holy robes said those on Capitol Hill have long stopped caring about the American people. Instead, they now represent special interests with money.

### **The Pain**

When I think about what the bishop said, I find it hard to disagree. As per CNBC, the 2020 election spending was nearly \$14 billion, more than double the 2016 sum. It is an open secret that members of Congress spend more time raising money than legislating. There are numerous studies about declining congressional oversight and surging presidential power. Such has been the divide in Congress that it has been impossible to pass meaningful legislation for a while. Too often, legislation is bloated, poorly drafted and caters to those who can lobby hardest for their interests. Like many other democracies, the US has turned disastrously dysfunctional.

Although most people I met were white and working class, I ran into members of minority

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communities as well. A preacher of South African origin was singing paeans to Jesus and to America. I ran into two ladies who had immigrated from Vietnam and the Philippines. They believed that Trump was the only leader who could stand up to China and bring back law and order. When I asked if I could photograph them, the Vietnamese lady bolted, taking her friend along.

Later that evening, my friends were referring to the crowd as a “bunch of pigs.” They were appalled by the scenes they had seen on television and what they had read on their smartphones. In their eyes, those in the crowd were not protesters. They were rioters, seditionists, insurrectionists, terrorists and perpetrators of a coup. They were guilty of breaking down democratic institutions, if not treason. They deserved arrest, trial and punishment. Given that the day’s attack on the Capitol was the first in the nation’s history — bar the British invasion of 1814 — their indignation at this assault on their democracy was understandable.

But they were not on Capitol Hill that day. What I saw is that President Trump, his son, Donald Jr., and his lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, played pied pipers. They riled up the crowd that turned into a mob and overwhelmed Capitol Police. Most people in the mob were misguided instead of malevolent. When I spoke to them, it was clear they had no plan of action unlike those who actually plan a coup. As historian Timothy Snyder observed in his tour de force for *The New York Times*, “The American Abyss”: “It is hard to think of a comparable insurrectionary moment, when a building of great significance was seized, that involved so much milling around.” At the end of the evening, the mob inevitably melted away. I met families on their way back to Alabama, truck drivers returning to Texas, old ladies headed back to Georgia and even plumbers returning to Democrat-run New York. They had come to Washington, DC, to be heard, stormed what they saw as a modern-day Bastille and were going back to their daily lives.

What struck me most was that everyone I spoke to was convinced that they did not matter to the system and their votes did not count. Since that fateful day, a question has played repeatedly in my mind: When people genuinely believe their votes do not count, what stops them from taking up arms?

### **A Strange New World**

After January 6, I have followed my father’s advice and gone back to the past to peer into the future. A 1987 edition of *The Republic* with crinkling yellow pages and my brother’s fading notes has made me think. In the words of the late classicist Sir Desmond Lee, Plato was living in “an age which had abandoned its traditional moral code but found it impossibly difficult to create a new one.” Athenian democracy had forced his tutor Socrates to drink hemlock. It had degenerated into chaos and dissension. Needless to say, it did not survive.

A few centuries later, the Roman Republic perished too. At some point, oligarchs took charge. They controlled almost all the land. Form triumphed over substance, and democratic institutions decayed. Populists emerge to lead the mob. One of the better known was Tiberius Gracchus, who attempted agrarian reform, assembled a mob on the Capitol but was clubbed to death in the Senate.

Unlike that long-forgotten Roman revolutionary, Trump did not bring in any radical reform for the people but, like the ancient populist, he has overreached. After years of profiting from Trump’s mass following, Twitter not only silenced him but terminated his account. A political leader who had just got over 74 million votes was obliterated from his favorite public platform by a private company in a jiffy. For all its faults, *The New York Times* is considered the “newspaper of record.” Its support for the CIA-led 1953 coup in Iran or the case the newspaper made for the 2003 Iraq War is in the public domain. By deleting Trump’s profile, Twitter has demonstrated that a corporation now



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arbitrates over what constitutes the public domain.

It is not only the question of what constitutes the public domain but also the issue of freedom of speech that is problematic. America's fabled First Amendment "protects freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and the right to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." For years, internet giants have claimed to be platforms with no editorial responsibility. The First Amendment has been their first defense against allegations that they were letting falsehood, hate and toxic propaganda run amok. Unlike traditional newspapers, these social media platforms did not restrict what people could say. Suddenly, they have changed tack.

After Trump evaporated from Twitter, more was to follow. Amazon Web Services abruptly kicked out conservative social media platform Parler from its servers. Google and Apple also banned the app. They argued Parler incited violence, breaching their terms and conditions. Like Trump, Parler was effectively shut down in minutes. The companies might have had good reasons to do so. However, the action raises uncomfortable questions. Who decides what is free speech? Is it the legislature, the executive, the judiciary or a billionaire-controlled Silicon Valley company?

The First Amendment "guarantees freedom of expression by prohibiting Congress from restricting the press or the rights of individuals to speak freely." Nothing restricts companies from curbing freedom of expression. When the constitution was drafted, big companies did not exist. Today, the situation is dramatically different, and no equivalent of the First Amendment protects Americans from censorship by big companies.

It is now transparent that the balance of power in the US lies with the big corporations. Its CEOs wield far greater power than governors, members of congress, senators and, at times, presidents. In 2008, Barack Obama won a historic election by getting nearly 69.5 million votes. In American history, only Joe Biden, with more than 81

million votes, has gained greater support in absolute numbers than Trump. Still, Twitter has summarily deleted his profile. Not only Trump supporters but also many of his opponents are uneasy with this decision.

### **The Left-Behind**

Despite his crass, erratic and boorish behavior, Trump improved his voting numbers in 2020. He won 36% of the Latino vote, an increase of 4% compared to 2016. Despite Biden's Catholic faith, Trump won 50% of the Catholic vote, with 57% of the white Catholics casting their ballots for him. The easy explanation is Trump's appointment of Amy Coney Barrett, the anti-abortion Catholic who studied at Notre Dame, to the US Supreme Court. However, something more might be going on. Trump increased his support among other minorities such as black men and Asians as well.

Why did so many Americans vote for Trump? I got the best answer from some militia members in West Virginia. In an article in November 2020, I mentioned how they conceded that Trump was an unsavory character who lies incessantly, but they credited him for telling one big truth: Things had turned much too ugly for far too many people like them. Far too many Americans have been suffering for much too long, and politicians from both parties have been pretending things are hunky-dory, denying grim realities.

When Trump speaks about making America great again, he is appealing to nostalgia by using one of Ronald Reagan's lines. He is also acknowledging that things are not so great for many Americans. He is feeding off the anger many Americans feel for what his recently pardoned adviser Steve Bannon has called "the permanent political class." Bannon is an Irish Catholic from a working-class family who voted Democrat. This Navy veteran graduated from Harvard Business School and worked at Goldman Sachs. Then he went rogue.

Bannon is the ideologue who threw his lot with Trump to smash the status quo. He entered politics by launching the right-wing news site

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Breitbart. Instead of targeting Obama and the Democrats, he went after the Republican establishment because he saw them as traitors to the American working class. Bannon masterminded Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party, something Bernie Sanders tried but failed to achieve with the Democrats.

Bannon consistently makes the case that trade and immigration are two sides of the same coin. Both suppress workers' wages. Companies can move factories from Michigan to Mexico for cheaper labor to improve their profits and share prices. When foreigners flood in, whether it is Latinos who mow lawns or Indians who write software on H-1B visas, companies do not have to hire Americans for the same jobs. They can and do pay foreigners less than their American counterparts. Companies do well and so do their shareholders. Executives do better: CEO compensation has soared 940% since 1978. American workers do not. Like Native Americans and African slaves in times past, they are now the left-behind.

Many economists and politicians ridicule this argument. They stress that immigrants bring in skills that are in short supply. They point to the likes of me who turn entrepreneurs, raise capital, create jobs and boost the American economy. It is true that immigrants give the nation a unique strength. Like Rome, America can draw in the best and brightest of foreigners to give it an edge. Yet not all immigrants are necessarily terribly talented. Many of them are cheap cannon fodder for the unremitting American economic system, where people's health care is tied to their job, holidays are rare, and 13 million work more than one job. These immigrants increase labor supply and decrease the wages of ordinary Americans.

To add insult to injury, it is these beleaguered workers who have bailed out banks after the financial crash of 2007-08. Both Republicans and Democrats sang from the same hymn book to prevent a recession from turning into a depression but did nothing to curtail or curb the financial class from behaving badly. Only one top banker went to jail. More importantly, taxpayer

money ended up as bonus payments for some of the executives who had caused the crash. It was a classic example of capitalism on the upside and socialism on the downside. As a hedge fund manager told me off the record, the bailout was, Heads I win, tails you lose — with “you” being the American taxpayer.

Both the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements opposed these bailouts. They had different philosophies and belonged to two ends of the political spectrum, but they opposed what was a fundamentally unjust government policy. The bailouts were accompanied by quantitative easing, which in simple terms means the central banks cutting interest rates to virtually zero and then flooding the economy with money by buying bonds on the market. The rich have gotten richer. The poor find themselves priced out of the market. Many on both the right and the left have lost faith in the system.

### **A Very Modern Feudalism**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, things have gotten worse. The central bank may be printing money, but it is only ending up in the hands of big boys. After the 2007-08 financial crisis, banks prefer to lend to large businesses or those with guaranteed incomes to reduce credit risk and avoid another meltdown. This means that cash flows into a few big rivers instead of many small streams. Even as small businesses are closing down, the stock market is touching the stratosphere. As William Shakespeare memorably penned in “Hamlet,” “The time is out of joint.”

Such is the state of affairs that even the Financial Times, a paper of choice for the financial elite, is sounding the alarm. On January 3, its Washington correspondent Edward Luce argued that easy money and fiscal gridlock were leading to populism. Today, the top 10% of Americans own 84% of all shares in the US, with the top 1% owning half. About 50% of Americans own almost no stocks at all. As pointed out earlier, they do not have \$500 in

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savings. It is many of these Americans who form the support base of Trump and Sanders.

America today is in a similar situation as Rome during the era of Tiberius Gracchus. The rich were grabbing land from poor farmers and using slaves from Carthage to work their estates. The republic where all Romans were citizens with a say in the affairs of the state was fraying. Rome was creating an imperial economy where the elite grew richer through plunder of conquered territories like Spain and Carthage as well as cheap labor from newly enslaved populations. This made the Roman farmer and worker largely redundant. The Roman plebeian was so exploited and powerless, that he slipped to subsistence or below-subsistence levels of income. On the other hand, the elite grew wealthier and wealthier.

Tiberius Gracchus and his brother Gaius Gracchus attempted reforms, but both were murdered. The Populares rose up to champion their reforms to redistribute a bit of land, ameliorate the plight of the urban poor and reform the political system. The Optimates emerged to fight for the status quo, which preserved the supremacy of the Senate over the popular assemblies and the tribunes of the plebeians. This bitter discord was similar to the Athenian republic Plato found himself in. Roman divisions eventually led to the rise of Julius Caesar.

This ambitious general believed the dysfunctional system to be leading to ruin. Taking sides with the Populares, he sought to reform the system and redistribute wealth to the plebeians. The Optimates did not budge, a civil war resulted, and the collapse of the Roman Republic ensued.

Both in Athens and Rome, rising inequality and deepening discord obliterated the common bonds that made democracy possible. In America, inequality has reached feudal dimensions. Technology is destroying thousands of working-class jobs while creating far fewer highly paid ones. The “frightful five” — Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft and Alphabet, the parent

company of Google — control the internet and large swathes of the economy. They are strangling the small and medium-sized businesses.

Furthermore, Big Tech’s algorithms, filter bubbles and echo chambers have led to a post-truth world of fake news, conspiracy theories and more. People cannot even agree on basic facts. The constant deluge of data has put their minds in Brownian motion, and they have lost the ability to focus or sift fact from fiction. The irony of the current situation is that the leaders of these companies are self-proclaimed liberals, avowed philanthropists and cheerleaders for progress. Yet they have unleashed Frankensteinian monsters that have wrecked journalism, destroyed discourse and damaged democracy.

### **What Lies Next?**

On Monday, January 18, I ventured into the city once again, again against the advice of my friends. I got off at L’Enfant Plaza metro station yet again to walk north and found the streets deserted and the National Mall sealed. I walked for an hour from one checkpoint to another. Eventually, a police officer told me that instructions were changing all the time and I was better off taking the metro. When I did take the metro, it stopped far away from the heart of town. Clearly, 25,000 troops and all the police were not enough to guarantee security in the capital. Authorities took the view that shutting down access to the heart of town was necessary too. The security arrangements seemed a bit of an overreaction but understandable given the events of January 6.

On January 20, I watched the inauguration with some American friends. Some were delighted to see the back of Trump and were celebrating with mimosas already in the morning. With Trump gone, many hoped that the populist genie could be put back in its bottle. I wish I had the same sense of American optimism. I simply cannot forget that despite a raging pandemic and thousands of deaths, over 74 million Americans voted for Trump. They are not going away.

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As ancient republics demonstrate, populism flourishes when inequality increases. In tough times, people are also more likely to turn against those they see as threats or competition. In 1873, the US suffered its deepest depression to date. Cotton prices crashed and unemployment rose. A disputed election of 1876 led to the end of post-Civil War Reconstruction and the reintroduction of racial segregation through Jim Crow laws. A campaign of intimidation and violence kept black voters away from the polls for decades to come. Only in the 1960s did the historic civil rights movement end segregation, but black people remain poorer and die earlier than their white counterparts.

In addition to black people, another group suffered after 1873. The 1860s had been the time of the California Gold Rush and the First Continental Railroad. The Irish alone were unable to supply enough labor. Therefore, the 1868 Burlingame-Seward Treaty “ensured a steady flow of low-cost Chinese immigrant labor,” toiling primarily in goldmines and on railroads. The emerging trade unions saw Chinese workers as competitors who lowered everyone’s wages, and so opposed immigration. The Chinese worked for less money and worked harder. They also worked in areas where whites refused to work. White society at that time did not want people of color around. The labor movement was able to crystallize that latent racism.

The media played its part. William Randolph Hearst’s papers popularized the phrase “yellow peril,” and the US Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, prohibiting all immigration of Chinese laborers. This was the first legislation in American history to place broad restrictions on immigration. And this was the Gilded Age. Rapid economic growth led to millions of European immigrants streaming onto American shores. This lowered the price of labor, and workers suffered. At the same time, the concentration of wealth continued apace, with robber barons and speculators making fabulous fortunes.

The Gilded Age also led to the emergence of a left-wing agrarian movement called the People’s Party. They came to be known as the Populists, a word that has stuck with us to this day. Despite doing well in the 1896 election, the party eventually disbanded, but some elements of its program were adopted by the likes of Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. It is important to note that this party drew support from white Protestant farmers who were losing out to industrialization, urbanization and mass immigration.

While they advocated many measures of public welfare, the Populists were anti-Semitic, conspiracy-minded and racist. They offer a good insight into what America’s near future might look like. As the predominantly white working-class suffers, some of its members are more likely to wave Confederate flags, blame blacks for sponging off welfare and oppose immigration from Mexico, India or elsewhere. This enrages many urban liberals who argue that the white working class is not the real oppressed. It is Latinos, blacks and Native Americans who have suffered much more. Instead of complaining, members of the white working class could just mow lawns, clean homes or serve coffee. Also, these liberals are furious that many members of the working class pick on poor Mexican immigrants, not rich Wall Street bankers.

This urban elite misses an important point. Many Trump supporters are acting in the same ways as Populists in the 1870s who focused as much on the Chinese as on the robber barons. Part of the reason is simple. Like the robber baron in the 19th century, the banker is not a tangible part of most American lives. He is a character from movies such as “Wall Street” and “The Wolf of Wall Street.” The aggressive banker and the ruthless entrepreneur are archetypes that American culture apotheosizes. They represent the Nietzschean Übermensch, who deserves devotion, not just admiration, in a cult of success that is deep-rooted in America. That cult explains why Harvard has a school of

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government, not of politics. Success is non-negotiable, a Socrates-style failure unacceptable.

In contrast to the Übermensch who controls the commanding heights of the economy but is rarely seen in the flesh, Mexicans are ubiquitous. They work longer for lesser pay. Every office or apartment building I have visited across the country has had Mexicans or other immigrants from Central America doing the cleaning or taking out the rubbish. They look different, smell different and speak a different language. They excite insecurity. That insecurity rises when increasing numbers compete for fewer jobs.

American elites like immigration for both emotional and practical reasons. After all, America is a land of immigrants. They provide America with cheap labor, technological talent and entrepreneurial energy. Those with capital enjoy having access to all three. It boosts returns on capital. In contrast, the left-behind want less competition and higher wages.

Biden has his task cut out for him as president. An increasingly unequal America with declining social mobility is seething with rage. The rich have turned rentiers, profiting off quantitative easing and rising asset prices. Those without capital or connections can no longer move up in society. The stock market is a bubble waiting to burst. America cannot ignore the last four years, and a significant proportion of the 74 million who voted for Trump have lost faith in the system. Many of them have guns. This is no time for dogged centrism. It is time for bold political and economic reform that decreases inequality and increases social mobility. If Biden fails, a modern-day Julius Caesar will inevitably emerge to bury yet another dysfunctional democracy.

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