

Peter Wehner's *On the Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic After Trump*

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Chapter 5

Why Words Matter

Suzzallo Library is the main, majestic library located on the campus of the University of Washington, where I attended college. From time to time on Friday and Saturday evenings, when my friends were busy with their social activities, I would ensconce myself there, not to focus on homework assignments but rather to listen to speeches by John F. Kennedy.

I did so often enough that I eventually memorized different JFK speeches—a few whole, most in part: his inaugural address, and the one accepting the Democratic nomination in 1960, his “Ich bin ein Berliner” remarks in West Berlin, and the “peace address” at American University, his civil rights address to the nation, and the “We choose to go to the moon” speech at Rice University, his farewell address to the Massachusetts legislature, and more.

I did this despite the fact that I was a Republican, having cast my first vote for Ronald Reagan in 1980. That is less incongruous than it may seem today; take into account that Kennedy was a Democrat when Democrats were much more conservative than in present times. (On some issues Kennedy ran to Nixon’s right during their (Page 98) presidential contest, including hammering then Vice President Nixon for the “missile gap” between the United States and the Soviet Union—which in fact did not exist.)

But what appealed to me most was not Kennedy’s political profile. I was certainly taken in by his elegance and grace, and the charm and high culture that characterized the Kennedy presidency. “The Kennedys lit up the White House with writers, artists, and intellectuals,” according to the historian Alan Brinkley, “the famous cellist Pablo Casals, the poet Robert Frost, the French intellectual Andre Malraux.”

I was primarily caught up in the power and beauty of Kennedy’s words, which captured my imagination and further persuaded me that politics might be a high calling. In those years, the thing I wanted to be most of all was an advisor

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to a president who, in one way or another, used words in the service of the nation.

Two decades later, I was deputy director of presidential speech writing for George W. Bush during and after September 11, 2001, a moment when presidential words were particularly important—in expressing collective grief and sorrow, in channeling the public’s fear and rage, in creating national unity and tamping down bigotry against Muslims, in explaining to the American people an enemy most of them were familiar with (al Qaeda), and in summoning the nation to war.

The words of a president always matter, but in this case they *really* mattered. All of a sudden, the days of the little-noticed Lincoln Day dinner speech, remarks at a steel workers picnic, or the National Future Farmers of America speech seemed trivial. When the president addressed a joint session of Congress nine days after the attacks, it galvanized the nation. National Hockey League games were halted so players and fans could watch the speech ([Page 99](#)) on stadium jumbotron screens. One colleague said the it was “a nearly universal American experience.” There was a sense that President Bush’s words were not just for the moment, but for history.

THE POWER OF WORDS

Democracy requires that we honor the culture of words. Modern democracies arose as a correction to absolute monarchies that had grown out of the long human history of “might makes right.” The very idea of a democracy is based on the hope that fellow citizens can reason together and find a system for adjudicating differences and solving problems—all of which assumes there is a shared commitment to the integrity of our public words. When words are weaponized and used merely to paint all political opponents as inherently evil, stupid, and weak, then democracy’s foundations are put in peril.

Words have extraordinary power. Think for a moment how moved you are by the lyrics of your favorite song, by your favorite books and poems, by a letter from a loved one. Words are the means by which we convey our deep emotions and longings, knowledge and understanding, hopes and fears. We use them to teach, to warn, to inspire, to defend truth, to seek justice.

“My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see!” This is how novelist Joseph Conrad defined his mission as a writer. “That—and no more: and

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it is everything! If I succeed, you shall find there according to your desserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand; and perhaps also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.”

The use of words by novelists and politicians is not identical, but the very best politicians use words in some of the same ways (*Page 100*) novelists like Conrad did—to make us hear, to make us feel, to make us see.

My belief, which is undoubtedly influenced by my history as a speech writer, is that we need to understand much better than we do now the role of words in the mission of politics. We need to know why using words as weapons against others and against truth is a travesty. We need to recognize why our political culture allowed for the rise to power of Donald Trump, a mendacious propagandist. And we need to offer ideas on what our institutions and we as individuals can do about it.

Words have long been a treasured part of American political history. It’s telling that when Americans call to mind their greatest presidents, they often think of their words more than their policies.

For instance, we think of Thomas Jefferson less as the person who pulled off one of history’s most consequential land deals, the Louisiana Purchase, from which fifteen states, in part or in toto, were eventually created. Instead we recognize him primarily as the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence and authored the phrase “All men are created equal.”

We think of Abraham Lincoln less for the Homestead Act, which opened government-owned land to small family farmers, than for his second inaugural —“With malice toward none, with charity for all”—and the Gettysburg Address: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

We think of Franklin Roosevelt less for the Lend-Lease Act, which helped Great Britain and our allies survive the Nazi offensive, than for saying, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” (*Page 101*) and declaring that December, 1941, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, was “a date that will live in infamy.”

John Kennedy is remembered less for his ability to handle the Cuban missile crisis than for a single line in his inaugural address: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” And many fewer people know the specifics of Ronald Reagan’s 1981 tax cuts and the 1986 tax

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reform, which were huge legislative achievements, than know his line, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”

Rhetoric, then, has an important place in the hearts of men and women, as well as in America’s political and social history. Words can articulate and set out national goals, express national resolve, promote healing and understanding, educate the public and explain complicated issues, galvanize a nation behind great causes, and rally a nation at times of war. It was said of Churchill, during the dark days and darker nights when England was under Nazi attack, that he “mobilized the English language and sent it into battle.”

The same was true of Thomas Payne, the English-born Enlightenment figure who was a pivotal political theorist and polemicist on behalf of the American Revolution. Paine argued against the British monarchy and for American independence; to that end he produced the most widely read and influential pamphlet of the American Revolution, *Common Sense*.

Paine gave public voice to many private beliefs and galvanized populist and elite opinion in America. He gave words supporting the case for American independence without which it really might not have happened. And he did so by reaching higher, by connecting events to principles and ideals. John Adams said, “Without the pen the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain.” [\(Page 102\)](#)

Words can also stir within the hearts of people anger at unrighteousness. Frederick Douglass achieved this during his extraordinary July 5, 1852, speech, which included a searing indictment of America. “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?” Douglass asked. “I answer, a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. . . . There is not a nation on earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.”

A very different approach to indicting a nation’s wrongdoing and shaping its moral sensibilities can be found in Harriet Beecher Stow’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, one of the most affecting and influential novels in American history. Upon meeting Stowe, Abraham Lincoln reportedly said to her, “Is this the little woman who made this great war?” One Southerner said the 1852 novel “had given birth to a horror against slavery in the Northern mind which all the politicians could never have created.”

David S. Reynolds’s book *Mightier Than the Sword* analyzes the enormous impact of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and shows how it broadened and deepened the public’s revulsion at slavery. The abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison was known

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for his acidic rhetoric and denunciations of those whom he considered to be insufficiently filled with antislavery feelings. The Constitution, Garrison said, was “a covenant with death and an agreement with hell.” Harriet Beecher Stowe’s brother Henry believed Garrison was well intentioned but lacking in “conciliation, good-natured benevolence, even a certain popular mirthfulness.” According to Henry, “Antislavery under [Garrison] was all teeth and claw. . . . It fought. It gained not one step by kindness. . . . It bombarded everything it met, and stormed every place it won.”

Harriet Beecher Stowe took things in another direction. According to Reynolds:

The novel’s relatively benign treatment of Southerners was deliberate. Because Stowe wanted the South to change its mind about slavery, she avoided the kind of wholesale demonization of slaveholders she feared might alienate all Southerners. She actually had two Southern characters, Emily Shelby and St. Clare, speak *against* slavery. By doing so, she felt she could challenge the South’s peculiar institution from within by having some slave owners say slavery was evil.

Reynolds adds, “In fact, her efforts to be compassionate made her seem far *more* dangerous than virulent abolitionists like Garrison, whose rancorous tone and calls for disunion made him easily dismissible in the South and even unpopular even in the North.”

Stowe herself wrote a friend a year and a half later after publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* saying,

The effects of the book so far have been, I think, these: 1st, to soften and moderate the bitterness of feeling in *extreme abolitionists*. 2nd, to convert to abolitionist views many whom the same bitterness had repelled. 3rd, to inspire the free colored people with self-respect, hope, and confidence. 4th, to inspire universally through the country a kindlier feeling toward the negro race.

Stowe’s genius, then, wasn’t simply in the realm of imaginative literature; it was also in moving America in the direction of justice. (Page 104) She achieved that not through abstract demands but through direct appeals to decency and compassion. She humanized slavery through vivid, memorable figures both heroic (Uncle Tom) and sadistic (Simon Legree). She understood the power of grace in the pursuit of a principled cause. And

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she knew that at its best and deepest level, politics has to be understood as part of a great human drama. That is the way one shapes, in a lasting way, public sentiment and moral beliefs. And this is something only a very few political leaders today grasp.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was “doing a magnificent work on the public mind,” wrote one journalist at the time. “Wherever it goes, prejudice is disarmed, opposition is removed, and the hearts of all are touched with a new and strange feeling, to which they before were strangers.”

This is the force and impact words can have on the soul of a nation. Words are not simply descriptive; they can be *aspirational*. But even more than that, words can help us better understand ourselves. They bind us together. In politics they articulate for us what goals we are trying to reach, so that it is more than just a struggle for power. We reach higher truth through words.

TRUMP'S WAR ON THE CULTURE OF WORDS

But words can just as easily be *misused*—and so become instruments not for healing but for division, not to enlighten but to deceive, not to educate but to indoctrinate. If you believe words can ennoble, you must also believe they can debase. If they can elevate the human spirit, they can also pull it down. Which brings us back once again to the demoralizing Trump era.

It is certainly true that plenty of politicians have pulled the human spirit down over the years. We've not exactly been living through the golden age of political rhetoric. There is not a Demosthenes among us. But in America today we have arrived at a low moment when it comes to the quality of words and political rhetoric. That's true pretty much across the board; among state legislatures and governors, in the House and Senate, there are no great orators, countless mediocre ones, and a few downright awful ones.

But the debasement of words has reached a zenith with the coming of America's forty-fifth president. In America it is the president who sets the tone for the nation, who has far and away the largest megaphone, and who creates the example, the template, that others follow.

President Trump dominates discourse in the country in ways no other president ever has. His mastery of social media—as well as the

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media's ravenous need to cover Trump's every utterance—has given him the ability to invade and permeate people's thoughts and lives in unique ways. Before we can hope to repair the damage, we need to understand what it is—*precisely what it is*—about Trump's misuse of words that is so pernicious and dangerous.

The indictment starts with the sheer banality of his words. During his presidency, Donald Trump has uttered no beautiful and memorable phrases. His inaugural address, which is a speech normally meant to inspire the citizenry, is remembered for the phrase "American carnage" and Trump's description of a dystopian nation, broken and shattered. In almost every case his use of words reflects his attitude toward politics: transaction based, unreflective, amoral, emotive, and stripped of nobility and high purpose.

More worrisome is that Trump's extemporaneous answers are often an incoherent word "salad." Confused answers often— (Page 106) though not always—represent a confusion of thought, and that's the case with President Trump.

If you read the transcripts of many of his interviews and extemporaneous speeches, you will find what millions of Americans witnessed during his debates during the 2016 campaign: Donald Trump is not only unable to lay out a coherent argument; at times, he is unable to string together a sentence that obeys rules of syntax to provide coherency. One illustration is the speech Trump gave in South Carolina during the 2016 campaign.

Look, having nuclear—my uncle was a great professor and scientist and engineer, Dr. John Trump at MIT; good genes, very good genes, okay, very smart, the WHARTON School of Finance, very good, very smart—you know, if you're a conservative Republican, if I were a liberal, if, like, okay, if I ran as a liberal Democrat, *they* would say I'm one of the smartest people anywhere in the world—it's true!—but when you're a conservative Republican they try—oh, do they do a number—that's why I always start off: went to Wharton, was a good student, went there, went there, did this, built a fortune—you know I have to give my credentials all the time, because we're a little disadvantaged—but you look at the nuclear deal, the think that really bothers me—it would have so easy, and it's not as important as these lives are—nuclear is so powerful;

my uncle explained that to me many years ago; he would explain the power of what's going to happen and he was right—who would have thought? But when you look at what's going on with the four prisoners—(Page 107) now it used to be three; now it's four—but when it was three and even now, I would have said it's all in the messenger; fellas, and it is fellas because, you know, they don't, they haven't figured that the women are smarter right now than men, so, you know, it's going to take them about another 150 years—but the Persians are great negotiators, the Iranians are great negotiators, so and they, they just killed, they just killed us.

Finding other examples is too easy. He speaks like this (almost) every day.

During his run for the presidency, Trump admitted that he didn't prepare for debates or study briefings books. It showed. (He believed such things got in the way of a good performance.) He said judges sign bills. (They don't.) He confused the Kurds, a large ethnic group in the Middle East, and the Quds Force, a special forces unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guard. He offered contradictory views on the minimum wage (wages are too high and, then, too low; he was for it and then against; he favored enforcement by the federal government and then wanted states to take the lead). On abortion, he argued that women who have abortions should be "punished" even as he praised Planned Parenthood, the largest abortion provider in the country. He wasn't aware of Vladimir Putin's aggressions [the invasion and takeover] of Ukraine until ABC's George Stephanopoulos pointed it out to him. In an interview with CBS's Scott Pelley, Trump claimed in one sentence that taxes on the wealthy would be raised and in the next agreed that Republicans don't raise taxes. He claimed his administration would deport 11 to 12 million illegal immigrants, but that "we're rounding 'em up in a very humane way, a very nice way." (Page 108)

He has been no better on this front as president. On illegal immigration, he promised to remove "really bad dudes" in the country through the use of a "military operation," forcing his then secretary of homeland security to declare, "There will be no use of military forces in immigration. None." At a press conference with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he declared his ambivalence about the two-state solution between Israelis and the Palestinians, forcing his UN ambassador to correct the incorrect statement. He declared NATO "obsolete" and threatened that the United States would not fulfil key elements of its

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obligations, forcing the secretary of defense to reaffirm support by the US for NATO. The president declared he “absolutely” believes waterboarding is an effective interrogation technique, forcing his CIA director to state that the agency would “absolutely not” bring back waterboarding as an advanced interrogation technique.

Things got so bad that during the 2018 Munich Security Conference, and amid anxiety about President Trump’s approach to world affairs, US officials communicated a message to a gathering of Europe’s foreign policy elite: “Pay no attention to the man tweeting behind the curtain.”

Early in his term, Trump gave an interview in which he said his administration would quickly put out its own health proposal, which would cover everyone now insured and cost much less. One problem: there was no Trump proposal at the time [and still, there is none]. It was a figment of his imagination. Republicans on Capitol Hill and Mr. Trump’s own team were utterly perplexed by what Mr. Trump said.

The president wrongly stated that stock market gains are helping to pay down the national debt. During a meeting in the Roosevelt Room he embraced a Democratic plan, with no provisions ([Page 109](#)) attached, to provide amnesty to undocumented immigrants who came to the US as children—forcing then House majority leader Kevin McCarthy to intervene and explain to the president that he did not support the plan. And Trump wasn’t aware that the Social Security Disability Insurance program is part of Social Security.

No president has ever been quite as disdainful of knowledge, as indifferent to the facts, as untroubled by his benightedness. And through his words, the president is not only spreading ignorance, he’s glorifying it.

At the same time as he enjoys winging it in terms of American policies, on some matters he uses words strategically and with forethought. When it comes time to dealing with those who oppose him, he consistently uses words to demean, belittle, bully, and dehumanize.

He has described his adversaries as “crazy,” “psycho,” a “maniac,” a “monster,” and a “nut job.” He refers to the press as “the enemy of the people.” He mocked a *New York Times* journalist with a physical disability, ridiculed Senator John McCain for being a POW, made a reference to “blood” intended to degrade a female journalist (Megan Kelly), and compared one of his Republican opponents to a child molester. He linked Ted Cruz’s father to the assassination of JFK and suggested that former

White House advisor to Bill Clinton, Vince Foster, had been murdered (despite five separate investigations that found this claim to be utterly false). As president he insulted MSNBC's Mika Brzezinski, calling her "crazy" and accused her of "bleeding badly from a facelift" (just one instance in a long list in which Trump ridiculed women based on their appearance). He has attacked gold star parents and widows. [\(Page 110\)](#)

The number of targets is inexhaustible because Trump's brutishness is inexhaustible. America's most visible public figure possesses a streak of cruelty that he won't [can't] control, which he promiscuously and proudly displays, and which is amplified by social media. But Trump's attacks aren't simply directed toward individuals he is upset with and dislikes. He also uses words to divide America along racial and ethnic fault lines.

It's hardly a coincidence that Mr. Trump burst onto the national political scene in 2011 by claiming that Barack Obama, our first black president, was not a natural-born American citizen but rather that he was born in Kenya. (He later implied that Obama was a secret Muslim and dubbed him the "founder of ISIS.") And since the first day he stepped onto the presidential stage, he has stoked grievances, resentments, and fear of the "other," including Mexicans, Muslims, and Syrian refugees.

Mr. Trump engage in a racially tinged attack on Gonzalo Curiel, a district court judge presiding over a fraud lawsuit against Trump University, calling Curiel a "hater" who was being unfair to him because the judge is "Hispanic," because he is a "Mexican," and because Trump said he would build a wall on the southern border. (Judge Curiel was born in Indiana.) Trump also expressed doubt that a Muslim judge could remain neutral in the case.

As president, Trump claimed "some very fine people" were marching on both sides in a Charlottesville, Virginia, a march that included neo-Nazis and white supremacists, an event that turned violent and led to the death of a young woman there to protest the protest. He has attacked the intelligence of black athletes (Lebron James), black journalists (Don Lemmon and Abby Phillips), and black members of congress (Maxine Waters), and referred to his former White House advisor and reality television [\(Page 111\)](#) colleague Omarosa Manigault Newman, who is black, as a "crazed, crying lowlife" and a "dog."

This is not the conservatism of the British statesman Edmund Burke and the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott or the former vice

presidential candidate Jack Kemp and President Ronald Reagan. It is blood-and-soil conservatism aimed at endearing alienated white voters who believe they have lost the country they once knew. No president in living memory, no major political figure since George Wallace, has said things that stir the hearts of white supremacists as Donald Trump does. (It is hardly an accident that David Duke has repeatedly praised Donald Trump.)

Past presidents have had varying degrees of success when it comes to uniting the nation, and at times their words and actions have exacerbated our divides. And of course being a polarizing figure is not a problem per se. Many of the most impressive and consequential individuals in American history—Lincoln, FDR, Martin Luther King Jr., and Reagan—were viewed as divisive figures. The difference is that Trump takes great delight in provoking acrimony, malice, and bitterness *for their own sake*; in turning Americans against each other *in order to turn them against each other*. As one source close to the Trump White House told Axios's Mike Allen, the president looks for "unexpected cultural flashpoints" in order to stir up his base.

One example: in September 2017, after Trump was criticized by some of his base for being too sympathetic to children of illegal immigrants who had been brought to America, he went to Huntsville Alabama and gave a speech for a senate candidate Luther Strange. What was notable about the speech isn't that Trump praised Strange, but that Trump weighed in, apropos of [\(Page 112\)](#) nothing, on the issue of NFL players kneeling for the national anthem in order to protest incidents of police brutality against blacks. (Seventy percent of NFL players are black.) "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. *Out*. He's fired—he's fired!'" Trump said.

The previous week only a handful of players—half a dozen—had refused to stand for the national anthem, an action that generated no reaction or policy implications. Yet Trump weighed in, knowing his words would both reconnect him to his base and provoke a passionate, emotional response and catalyze a racially charged debate that would further rend American society. (The week after Trump attacked NFL players, in a show of defiance, hundreds of them refused to stand for the national anthem, a response Trump had to be thrilled by.)

What we have, then, is a president who, in ways we have never seen before, uses words to divide and embitter, to appeal to our basest and

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ugliest instincts. The effect is like throwing grains of sand into the eyes of others. It causes aggravation, irritation, and pain, and can damage delicate tissue. The only way to stop the damaging effects is to remove the sand from the eyes [or prevent it from being thrown in the first place].

KILLING TRUTH

The banality and weaponization of Trump's words are bad enough, but perhaps the greatest cause for concern is his nonstop, dawn-to-midnight assault on the facts, on truth, on reality. That places Trump in a sinister category all his own.

You often hear from Trump supporters that all politicians lie, and Trump is no worse than the rest. That is a clumsy effort to defend a man who is habitually dishonest. [\(Page 113\)](#)

Here's the reality: many politicians are guilty of not telling the full truth about events. A significant number shade the truth from time to time. A few fall into the category of consistent, outright liars. But only a very few—and the most dangerous ones—are committed to destroying the very idea of truth itself. That is what we have in Donald Trump, along with many top aides and courtiers. And it started in the opening hours of his presidency.

During an appearance on NBC's *Meet the Press* shortly after Donald Trump took office, host Chuck Todd asked White House counselor Kellyanne Conway why the White House had sent Press Secretary Sean Spicer to the briefing podium to falsely claim that "this was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period."

"You're saying it's a falsehood. And they're giving—Sean Spicer, our press secretary—gave alternative facts," she said. To which Todd responded, "Alternative facts aren't facts; they're falsehoods."

Later in the interview, Todd pressed Conway again on why the White House sent Spicer out to make false claims about the crowd size, asking: "What was the motive to have this ridiculous litigation of crowd size?"

"Your job is not to call things ridiculous that are said by our press secretary and our president. That's not your job," Conway said.

Todd followed up: "Can you please answer the question? Why did he do this? You have not answered it—it's only a question."

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Conway said, “I’ll answer it this way: think about what you just said to your interviewers. That’s why we feel compelled to go out and clear the air and put alternative facts out there.”

In one sense, of course, Spicer’s lie, which was done at the behest of Trump, was trivial. Did it really matter if Obama had ([Page 114](#)) a larger crowd at his inauguration than Trump did? Who cares? But in another sense, the lie was significant because *it was a lie about a demonstratable fact.*

It was a lie that everyone knew was a lie. There was photographic evidence that Obama’s inaugural crowd was much larger than Trump’s. What Trump instinctively understood [and what his actions were and are based upon] is the disorienting effect this type of lie, compounded by countless other lies, has on people.

The result is that we tire of counteracting every lie and begin to absorb some of them. And Conway, in saying the White House felt “compelled” to put out “alternative facts,” was giving the green light to Trump supporters to construct their own reality. They were off to the races, and how: Sean Spicer’s successor as press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, sent out on Twitter a doctored video produced by a conspiracy website Infowars intended to show CNN’s Jim Acosta inappropriately placing his hands on a White House intern during a contentious press conference. This qualifies as the textbook definition of propaganda, and it perfectly fit with the Trump presidency. (The White House revoked Acosta’s press pass, which was later restored by a federal judge.)

After 773 days in office, Trump made more than 9,000 false or misleading claims which averages out to more than 11 per day. In 2018, Trump’s average climbed to 15 false claims a day. (In the 7 weeks before the midterms elections, he averaged nearly 30 a day.) That is a staggering, unprecedented achievement.

The sheer scope, breadth, and shamelessness of the Trump lies are impressive in their own corrupt way. Mr. Trump told falsehoods about voter fraud costing him the popular vote to Hillary ([Page 115](#)) Clinton (it didn’t); Russian intervention in the 2016 election was a hoax (it wasn’t); having won the biggest landslide since 1980 (not even close); and President Obama bugging Trump Tower (it never happened). He prevaricated in claiming his 2018 State of the Union was the most watched of any in history, in stating that tax reform cost him a fortune, and in

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claiming credit for business investments and job announcements that had been previously announced. He was wrong when he asserted that he had signed more bills than any president ever, that counter-protesters in Charlottesville didn't have a permit, and that the *New York Times* had apologized for "bad coverage." Trump claimed the FBI inspector general's report on Hillary Clinton's email server totally exonerated him—it did no such thing. He claimed that the policy of separating migrant children from their parents was forced on him by Democrats when he was responsible.

For two years President Trump, his legal team, and his advisors denied he was involved in hush money payments to Stormy Daniels and Karen McDougald; we now know that was a lie and Mr. Trump was involved in or briefed on every step of the agreements. On dozens of occasions since the summer of 2016 Mr. Trump said he had "nothing to do with Russia"—no deals, no investments, no business with Russia. Those claims were lies.

Mr. Trump claimed he had never heard of WikiLeaks when news stories about it came out in 2016; in fact, he had spoken about it years earlier. In November 2018, he claimed that "I don't know Matt Whitaker," whom he named to be acting secretary general after he asked Jeff Sessions to resign; the previous month, in an interview with *Fox & Friends*, Trump said, "I know Matt Whitaker." Mr. Trump claimed the Paris Agreement on [\(Page 116\)](#) climate change was binding; it's not. In 2018 he claimed, "We don't have tariffs anywhere;" that year the US had placed levies on more than \$300 billion in imports. He asserted that America had trade deficits with nearly every country when we have a trade surplus with more than one hundred nations.

The president said thousands of people had been brought in on buses from Massachusetts to vote illegally in New Hampshire; not true. Trump told a group of sheriffs that the murder rate in the US was the highest it's ever been in forty-five to forty-seven years. No, in reality, it has dropped to rates we have not seen since the 1960s. He claimed people in California were rioting over sanctuary cities; no such thing is true. The president claimed that a large number of migrant caravans moving toward the Mexican-US border included "unknown Middle Easterners" mixed in, which was false.

On and on it goes. On one particular day, the president publicly made 125 false or misleading statements in a period of time that totaled close to 120 minutes.

My own experience might provide some useful context here. I recall how, as a White House speechwriter, I was pressed by the staff secretary to prove any conceivably questionable claim. If I raised even the slightest dissent—such as this claim is self-evident and therefore doesn't have to be sourced, or that claim is too small to worry about—she would say to me and to others, in a tone that conveyed a kind of deep conviction, "If the president says it, it needs to be correct." Now, we certainly got things wrong, as have other administrations. But the mistakes weren't intentional, and if we discovered them, we corrected the record.

What is notable about the Trump presidency are the number (Page 117) and velocity of falsehoods and misleading statements. They have been made in speeches and tweets on matters significant and trivial, about others and himself—and he virtually never apologizes or (Heaven forbid) issues corrections. He says what he wants, when he wants, regardless of the reality of things.

"The man lies all the time," according to Thomas Wells, Trump's former lawyer. Tony Schwartz, the cowriter of *The Art of the Deal*, says that lying is second nature to him. In Bob Woodward's book *Fear*, Trump's former personal lawyer John Dowd describes the president as "a *fucking* liar," telling Trump he would end up in an "orange jump suit" if he testified to special counsel Robert Mueller. And former White House aide Anthony Scaramucci, when asked during the CNN interview if he considers Trump a liar, admitted, "Okay, well, we both know that he's telling lies. So, if you want me to say he's a liar, I am happy to say he's a liar." (In a later interview Scaramucci put it this way: "He's an intentional liar. It's different from just being a liar-liar.")

Trump is not simply a serial liar; he's attempting to murder the very idea of truth, which is even worse. Without truth, a free society cannot operate. Which is why Trump's rhetoric ought to matter to all of us, and why it is our civic duty to call out his lies in every way we can.

THE POST-TRUTH MOMENT

That Donald Trump is a con man is beyond dispute. Why he became one is an interesting and important psychological question. But an even more urgent one is how our political culture allowed him to win the Republican nomination and the presidency.

The answer, at least in part, is that polarization and partisanship ([Page 118](#)) have reached a toxic level. For a large number of Americans, truth is viewed as instrumental, as a means to an end. Everything is liable to become a weapon in our intense political war. And getting to this “post-truth” political moment was a good deal easier than one might imagine.

Some new research regarding confirmation and disconfirmation bias may help us understand how we got here. Confirmation bias is the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one’s existing beliefs and the tendency to reject new evidence that challenges one’s existing beliefs.

They are perennial human problems, and they are understandable reasons why this is so, starting with the physiological component. Jack Gorman, a psychiatrist, and his daughter, Sara Gorman, a public-health specialist, have explored this matter in their book *Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Acts That Will Save Us*. They cite research suggesting that processing information which supports our beliefs leads to a dopamine rush which creates feelings of pleasure. “It feels good to ‘stick to our guns’ even if we are wrong,” the Gormans told Elizabeth Kolbert in the *New Yorker*. The moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind*, says that “extreme partisanship may be – literally – addictive.”

On the flip side, “When something is inconsistent with existing beliefs, people tend to stumble. . . . [I]nformation that is inconsistent with one’s beliefs produces a negative affective response,” according to Norbert Schwartz, Eryn Newman, and William Leach, experts in cognitive psychology. [Footnoted source: Norbert Schwartz et al, “Making the Truth Stick and the Myths Fade” in *Behavioral Science and Policy* 2, a research journal.]

Brian Resnick reports that researchers at New York University’s brain-imaging center are exploring how our brains are hardwired for partnership and how that skews our perceptions in public life. Once a partisanship mentality kicks in, according ([Page 119](#)) to Resnick, the brain almost automatically prefilters facts—even noncontroversial ones—that offend our political sensibilities.

“Once you trip this wire, this trigger, this cue, that you are a part of ‘us-versus-them,’ it’s almost like the whole brain becomes re-coordinated

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in how it views other people,” says Jay Van Bavel, the leader of NYU’s Social Perception and Evaluation Lab.

Our beliefs are also tied up with our identities. “If changing your belief means changing your identity, it comes at the risk of rejection from the community of people with whom you share that identity,” according to Dr. Christine Herman. That is difficult for any of us to do, and it explains why we tend to reject facts that may challenge our identity and group determining beliefs.

Dan Kahan, a psychology professor at Yale University, points out that fans of opposing teams tend to see different things when there is a close call by officials. It’s not that fans who react one way are faking their reaction while others are authentic; it’s that they actually perceive things differently.

In a sense, we see what we want to see in order to believe what we want to believe. In addition, we all like to be proven right, and changing our views is an admission that we were previously wrong, or at least had an incomplete understanding of an issue.

There is also an enormous amount of information to process in the world; we often need categories and ways of thinking and like-minded individuals to help us sort out information. None of us has time or inclination to closely examine the validity of an endless amount of information coming out way.

For example, what are the best studies on gun control and what do they show us? Do proposed gun control laws work where they have been tried? If so, how well? If easy access to guns makes deadly violence more common—and that certainly is an understandable ([Page 120](#)) concern given that gun deaths in the United States dwarf every other developed country in the world—how reasonable is it to expect that we can extinguish the supply of guns in America, which is approaching 300 million? How applicable are, say, the Australian and British examples to ours? Are their models—Australia and Britain have some of the strictest gun control laws in the world after mass shootings there—ones for us to follow?

What about the data on the role guns play in self-defense? And what about the argument that killers often choose no-gun zones (like schools and movie theaters) to commit gun violence? This is a lot to sort through on this one topic, so we often rely on authority figures in a given field,

deferring to their judgements and expertise. And we almost always ascribe greater authority to those whose world view we share.

As a species, then we are ever in search of data that confirms what we want to believe, what we already believe. “*L’illusion est le premier plaisir.*” Illusion is the first of all pleasures, Voltaire said. We are all tempted by delusions and denials so long as they constitute bricks in the walls of our own making. We are also profoundly incurious when it comes to thinking in different ways about things on which we have strong beliefs. Our inclination to do this is particularly strong in times of division and dispute, when we seem to lack reliable authority figures in various fields. And we are plainly living in such a moment now.

So why is confirmation bias having a more harmful effect today than in the past? A big part of the reason is that because of demographic shifts and communications technologies, we are more likely today to live in a bubble in the past. We live with—and get our information from—people who think like we do.

As we have already established, our nation is increasingly po- (Page 121) larized and fragmented. Our capacity to hear one another and reason together has become deeply impaired. Facts are seen by many people as subjective and malleable, so we lack a shared context to talk about our problems. As a result, more and more Americans are effectively living in a self-created political reality. It’s now possible to isolate oneself in an information space that entirely confirms one’s preexisting views and biases.

Normal confirmation bias is now on steroids, and some are exploiting this situation for profit and further exasperating the problem. An influential Republican lawmaker admitted to me that some of those in the right-wing media complex have made a successful business model by defacing facts to fit the worldview of the hosts. His point was that this wasn’t a simple case of dealing with true believers; there was and still is a financial incentive to distort the truth.

In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries declare *post-truth* as the word of the year. It refers to circumstances in which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” The Oxford Dictionaries’ president Casper Grathwohl said *post-truth* could become “one of the defining words of our time.”

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The great scholar and senator David Patrick Moynihan said decades ago, “Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not to his own facts.” At the time, no one disputed Moynihan’s point. But on November 30, 2016, during an interview on the *Diane Rehm Show*, Trump supporter and then CNN contributor Scottie Nell Hughes said this:

Well, I think it’s also an idea of an opinion. And that’s—on one hand, I hear half the media saying that these are lies. But the other half, there are many people that go, “No, [\(Page 122\)](#) it’s true.” And so one thing that has been interesting this entire campaign season to watch, is that people that say facts are facts—they’re not really facts. Everybody has a way—it’s kind of looking at ratings or looking at a glass of half-full water. Everybody has a way of interpreting them to be the truth, or not truth. There’s no such thing, unfortunately, anymore as facts.

And so Mr. Trump’s tweet [sic], amongst a certain crowd—a large part of the population—are truth. When he says that millions of people illegally voted, he has some—amongst him and his supporters, and people believe they have facts to back that up. Those that do not like Mr. Trump, they say that those are lies and that there are no facts to back it up.

This has been a narrative pushed by Mr. Trump and his top advisors, including his top legal advisors, during his presidency. In a July 25, 2018 speech to a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention, President Trump said, “And just remember: What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not happening.” In other words, who are you going to believe? Me, or your lying eyes?

A month later, the president’s lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, asserted during an interview with NBC’s Chuck Todd over the Mueller investigation, “Truth isn’t truth.” Another of the president’s lawyers, Jay Sekulow, when called out for making a false claim against Mr. Trump, replied, “Facts develop.”

Comments such as these might be excused as mere slips of the tongue, if not for the fact that the president and all the president’s men and all the president’s women act as if the truth is theirs to manipulate—merely subjective, utterly pliable, and completely in the eyes of the beholder. [\(Page 123\)](#) The modus operandi of Trump World is this: If facts

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exist that are incriminating to Mr. Trump, dismiss the facts. Label them as fake news and go on lying.

Journey back with me to the 1970s. When Richard Nixon's "smoking gun" tape was released in 1974, revealing an effort to get the CIA to intervene with the FBI to stop the Watergate investigation, no one denied the meaning and reality of the tapes. Nixon knew he would have to resign; his supporters had no way to defend him. The empirical ground on which he stood had crumbled. The facts were the facts, and they were indisputable. *The facts were the facts, and they were indisputable.* Yet if the same thing were to happen today—if tapes were released proving Donald Trump had committed an unlawful and impeachable act—some large number of his supporters would reject the notion as "fake news." Trump's unrelenting battering of the press has discredited it so much in the eyes of his many supporters that they will reject any and all criticisms of Trump, regardless of merits.

The television critic for the *New York Times*, James Poniewozik, says the goal of the president is to argue that "there is no truth, and you should always follow your gut and your tribe."

"This is the conversation the White House wants," according to the Associated Press's Jonathan Lemire. "Make everything muddy so partisans gravitate to their own corners."

Nietzsche coined a term, *perspectivism*, to describe the idea that there is no objective truth, everybody gets to make up their own reality, their own script, their own set of facts, and everything is conditioned to what one's own perspective is.

Here's an illustration of what this looks like in practice. During a segment on CNN, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, one of Trump's most prominent advocates, defended [\(Page 124\)](#) Trump's false claim that crime rates were soaring, insisting the average American "does not think crime is down, does not think they are safer."

When host Alisyn Camerota cited FBI data supporting the claim, Gingrich was unimpressed. He responded, "No—that's your view." When Camerota countered that this wasn't simply a subjective matter and once again cited FBI crime statistics, Gingrich responded, "As a political candidate, I'll go with how people feel, and I'll let you go with the theoreticians." In other words, facts be damned; my feelings will create my own reality.

On a large scale, this kind of attitude stands to yield epistemological anarchy; that is, there are no knowable truths to appeal to. When *that* happens, we're bargaining for a lot of trouble. How does a democracy function if there are no shared facts?

A combination of factors—social media and new technology platforms. Micro-targeting and psychometric methods in political campaigns; unprecedented polarization and hyperpartisanship; the fragmentation of traditional media sources and the advent of information silos; and the intervention in our elections by hostile powers using “fake news,” misinformation, and disinformation—has reshaped American politics. The capacity to inject poison into our bloodstream—in the form of lies and falsehoods, crazed conspiracy theories, smears, and dehumanizing attacks—is unprecedented. And there are very few authority figures or institutions, inside politics or outside, that can provide an antidote to the poison.

The reason is that we live in an age of deep distrust, with American's confidence in the nation's major institutions having dropped to a historic low point. Only one in ten Americans say ([Page 125](#)) they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in Congress, highlighting what Gallup has called “the nation's most important problem: a dysfunctional government that has lost much of its legitimacy in the eyes of the people it serves.”

Americans, then, remain reluctant to put much faith in most of the institutions at the core of American society. What this means is that there are fewer institutions and figures of authority who can declare certain things to be outside the boundaries of responsible discourse and be listened to; who can say that certain claims are preposterous and should be ignored. Instead, people who make false, outrageous, and even indecent assertions are finding validation, affirmation, and quite a large audience.

Take as an example the radio host Alex Jones, who runs the fake news website Infowars.com. Jones is a conspiracy monger who has alleged the US government allowed the 9/11 attacks to happen and who claimed the Sandy Hook massacre was a hoax.

When pressed in an interview with journalist Megyn Kelly about the Sandy Hook massacre, Jones said, “I tend to believe that children did die there, but when you look at all the evidence on the other side, I can see how people believe nobody died there.” Ms. Kelly pointed out, “There is no evidence on the other side.”

Nevertheless, according to Kelly, Jones's YouTube monthly views reached 83 million in November of 2016, more than five times higher than the previous November; Infowars.com got a temporary White House press pass for the first time; and Donald Trump, who was interviewed by Jones in December 2015, called him after the election to thank him for his help.

AS recently as a decade ago, Alex Jones would have been viewed as *(Page 126)* as a crank on the fringe of American political life, with very little influence. But in the Trump era he has been legitimized in the eyes of many. To them, he's a trusted voice, a source of information and confirmation. As alluded to earlier in this chapter, the White House press secretary sent out a doctored video by an editor at Infowars to justify revoking the press pass for a CNN White House correspondent.

To be sure, there is a continuum; some propogandists are worse than others. But the combined effects are deeply damaging. "The point of modern propaganda isn't only to misinform or push an agenda," according to Russian dissident and former world chess champion Garry Kasparov. "It is to exhaust your critical thinking—and annihilate the truth."

In the new media eco-system, then, everything is up for grabs. We don't have a common set of facts we're working from. In the past, our differences were generally over solutions, meaning different views on the best approaches and policies to address the policies we face. Today there are differences in epistemology, the theory of knowledge that allows us to distinguish facts and justified belief from opinion. As a result, people are increasingly living in their own realities, creating their own facts, writing their own scripts, modeling facts as if using Play-Doh.

I want to be clear; it's not as though most Americans consider politics to be a fact-free zone; most people would undoubtedly find Alex Jones's influence on our political system crazy. The concern, though, is that a minority of reckless, nihilistic voices—who have the ability to garner much disruption—are poisoning our political culture. Their influence is disproportionate to their numbers and is threatening to kill American politics. *(Page 127)*

It may be helpful to think of it like the concept of herd immunity. So long as a certain percentage of the population is immune from infection, the healthy herd provides protection to those who are not, who haven't been vaccinated, since spread of the contagious disease is contained to an isolated few. But if a society drops below a threshold—say, 85 percent—

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the herd immunity is lost. Victims suffer, and the disease spreads to those within the herd who are too young to protect or are otherwise unable to take advantage of that protection. Those who were protected in this way no longer are.

There can also be seepage. While the most outlandish conspiracies might not be believed, a general, corrosive distrust can spread. People begin to view as optional facts that in the past would have been accepted. It's as if consumers of information are walking through a cafeteria, choosing the facts they like and walking past the ones they don't. Again, this kind of thing has been present throughout much of our history. What's different now is how widespread abuses of trust have become.

LIVING IN TWO UNIVERSES

We are losing a common factual basis for our national life.

In 2009 Rush Limbaugh, easily the most influential figure in the history of conservative talk radio and one of the dominant figures in conservatism over the last quarter century, devoted part of his show to what those on the right referred to as "Climategate," a hacking scandal involving the release of more than one thousand emails among scientists at the Climate Research Unit of the UK's University of East Anglia. Those who deny global warming claimed (wrongly) that the emails proved the fabrication of the global warming crisis. Limbaugh referred to the institutions of government, academia, science, and media as the "four corners of deceit." And he went on to say this:

We live in two universes. One universe is a lie. One universe is an entire lie. Everything run, dominated, and controlled by the left here and around the world is a lie. The other universe is where we are, and that's where reality reigns supreme and we deal with it. And seldom do these two universes overlap.

David Roberts of Vox.com writes:

In Limbaugh's view, the core institutions and norms of American democracy have been irredeemably corrupted by an alien enemy. Their claims to transpartisan authority—authority that applies equally to all political factions and parties—are fraudulent. There are no transpartisan

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authorities; these is only zero-sum competition between tribes, the left and the right. Two universes.

I don't think Limbaugh would dispute that characterization, and in fact the intensity of his feelings has only increased in the intervening years. But here's the point: if you believe conservatives and liberals live in two universes, one of which is a pack of lies while in the other reality reigns supreme, then compromise is impossible. Even argument becomes impossible since there are no shared facts and assumptions on which persuasion is possible. To compromise would be treasonous. Political opponents are enemies.

Take as one example the aftermath of the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida in which seventeen people (primarily high school students) were massacred. In the past, tragedies such as this would have united people in grief and sympathy. No more. Charges leveled by each side against the other were instan- (*Page 129*) taneous and incendiary. The left was saying that the right loves guns more than their children; the right was saying the left hates guns more than it loves their children. Each was accusing the other of being willing to sacrifice the loves of their children on the alter of their pro- and anti-gun ideology. This political impasse is belied by the fact that most polls indicate that the vast majority of Americans are worried about how to protect their children from gun violence.

In such a toxic and mistrustful environment—partisan antipathy is at a record level according to the Pew Research Center—it's hard to reason together. Debate becomes much more difficult. And when we lose the ability to persuade, all that's left is compulsion and the exercise of raw power, intimidation, and silencing those with whom we disagree.

We are becoming a country without shared facts or reference points. Yale Law professor Stephen L. Carter puts it this way:

When disputes over facts are misconstrued as disputes over principles, the entire project of Enlightenment democracy is at risk. The liberalism of the Enlightenment rested on the supposition that agreement on the facts was a separate process from agreement on the values being applied to them. The social theorist Karl Mannheim, in "Ideology and Utopia," argued that we would never be able to separate the two, that we would always wind up seeing the facts through the lens of

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our preformed ideologies. Thus, liberal democracy, in the Enlightenment sense, was bound to fail.

Our challenge is to prove Mannheim wrong, though we aren't doing as well at that as we should. (*Page 130*)

What We Can Do

Everyone, including journalists, has a role to play if we are going to recover from this “post truth” political moment. For our news channels, that starts with showing more ideological balance as a way to rebuild trust with Red America. (Only 11 percent of Republicans consider information from national news organizations to be very trustworthy, according to a 2017 Pew Research Center poll.)

In one study, half of the journalists surveyed identified themselves as independents. But among journalists who align with one of the two major parties, four in five said they're Democrats. Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute, says, “The best data out there shows that there are fewer Republicans working in traditional newsrooms and news generally than there used to be.”

The common rejoinder of journalism is that while as individuals they may be liberal, that does not influence their coverage. But the liberalism manifests itself in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, from story selection to tone and intonation to the line of questioning that's pursued. Rosenstiel acknowledges that the imbalance “affects the discussion in newsrooms even when people are trying to be fair.”

The result is that many people on the right have felt unheard, their views disrespected and delegitimized. In an effort to find an outlet, conservatives turned to alternative sources of information, from talk radio to the Fox News Channel to right-leaning websites. That was understandable, and in some respects, it was healthy, offering a greater diversity in viewpoints than there once was. There was an imbalance and a need for correction. (*Page 131*)

But something happened along the way. People who in the past viewed news outlets as biased now view them as fraudulent. That is an unfair judgement, and yet we need to recognize that attitude exists, it rose from a very real bias, and so long as that attitude continues, there's little hope we can agree on a set of shared facts.

This is only part of the task, though. Both journalists and news consumers also need to take it upon themselves to push back against rushing a story or wanting to sensationalize it. Journalists need to resist breathless reporting, jumping to premature conclusions, and galloping ahead of the facts. [And they seriously need to see the event or issue they are exploring from some type of opposite point of view.] What we need, in a phrase, is self-restraint. The more ferocious the attacks made against the press, the more detached and dispassionate, fair-minded and even-handed the press needs to become. As a friend has put it to me, “As things speed up, we need to slow down.” So, too, the American media.

Maggie Haberman, an influential reporter for the *New York Times*, did her part to slow things down last year. After nine years, 187,000 tweets, and building up a list of close to 700,000 Twitter followers, she wrote a column announcing she was stepping away from Twitter. It was distorting discourse, she said, and she couldn’t turn off the noise.

“The viciousness, toxic partisan anger, intellectual dishonesty, motive questioning and sexism are at all time highs,” Haberman wrote, “with no end in sight.” She added, “Twitter is now an anger video game for many users. It is the only platform on which people feel free to say things they’d never say to someone’s face. For me, it had become an enormous and pointless drain on my time and mental energy.” (She has since returned to Twitter, as have other journalists who temporarily forswore it.) [\(Page 132\)](#)

Journalists also need to do less advocacy, to show less eagerness for stories too come out a certain way, to not allow adrenaline rushes to drive reporting. “Our facts need to be squeaky clean and uncorrupted,” said CNN’s Jake Tapper in a speech to the Los Angeles Press Club. “We are not the resistance, we are not the opposition, and we are here to tell the truth and report the facts regardless of whom those facts might benefit . . . [L]et us be revolutionaries by telling the truth at this time of deceit. But let us also make sure that we get our facts right.”

Corporations need to do due diligence when it comes to the sites they are advertising on, to ensure that hateful and bigoted ones aren’t inadvertently being supported. And when it comes to misinformation and disinformation campaigns that are being coordinated by hostile regimes like Russia, we need to learn from countries like Ukraine, which has experienced this and is beginning to take steps to defend itself.

One example of this is Stopfake.org, whose goal is to verify and refute disinformation and propaganda about events in Ukraine being circulated in the media and which now examines and analyzes all aspects of Kremlin propaganda, including in other countries and regions. “But perhaps the most important component of our effort,” former secretary of state Madeleine Albright has said,

“is trying to help foster constructive engagement between government, civil society, and technology firms. These companies have an interest in working with us on solutions, because disinformation is hurting their platforms and making them less usable. We cannot expect the technology companies to fight back on their own, but they cannot ([Page 133](#)) expect those of us working in civil society or government to solve the problem without their help. So we need the technology community to acknowledge the problem and be open to partnership.”

There are structural solutions to look at, then—practical steps to help us repair our civic and political damage. But something else, something deeper must change as well: citizens need to renew their commitment to truth itself and be willing to fight for it and to fight falsity.

“Facts inform opinions, and opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth,” wrote the political theorist Hannah Arendt. She added, “Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute. In other words, factual truth informs political thought just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation.”

Destroy the foundation of factual truth, and lies will be normalized. This is what the Czech dissident (and later president) Vaclav Havel described in the late 1970s when he wrote about his fellow citizens making their own inner peace with a regime build on hypocrisy and falsehoods. They were “living within the lie.” In such a situation life becomes farcical, demoralizing, a theater of the absurd. It is soul destroying.

The United States is still quite a long way from the situation Havel found himself in. But to keep it that way—to keep civic vandalism from spreading—we all have to play a role. The first thing is to refuse to become complicit in the lies, to refuse to believe them and certainly to not spread

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them, including lies (*Page 134*) that may help your political causes. Call out the most damaging lies—to friends, in social settings, on social media. Be civil but be forceful. Name it. If enough people do, it actually can start a movement.

One suggestion: start a discussion thread on Facebook or Twitter and tag you representative on it. Make it clear that when the president engages in a sustained attack on the truth, you expect your representative to speak out against it, and in some cases take specific actions to hold him accountable. It may be voting for censure, it may be insisting that congress hold hearings on a matter in dispute, and it may be going on record that if the president impedes or kills a truth-seeking legal investigation then there will be a hellacious price to pay, from blocking all nominations and legislation to impeachment. It is a truism in politics: the way to make those in public office see the light is for them to feel the heat.

Fatalism is never an option in a self-governing republic, and it's a particularly bad attitude these days. Utilize the means that are available to you to influence your elected leaders. The best way to influence a member of congress is to visit their office. Writing a letter to them or a letter to the editor tends to be more effective than a phone call. Better yet, show up at a town hall meeting and public events. If you have financially supported the party that is aiding and abetting a compulsive liar, end the support—and give a reason why. Help create a constituency for new leadership that prizes integrity and esteems honor. This may strike you as being realistic as Locke's castle in the air. It's not. People who have a corrupting influence have been voted into office—they can be voted out.

Beyond that, as citizens we can reject party loyalties when they (*Page 135*) are at odds with truth. As important as our political parties are to the health of our nation, they are not more important than truth itself, or to the ideals of governance both parties were built on. This is why we must refuse to support candidates who are chronically dishonest. In doing so, we are rejecting a corrosive approach to politics. One person acting alone may not make much of a difference. A lot of people acting together create a culture.

There are other things that can be done as well, including not getting all your information from the same partisan sources every day. Diversify your reading and news habits. Become discriminating customers of information. Cultivate critical reasoning skills. And remind yourself that the point of gathering information isn't necessarily to reaffirm the views you already hold; it's to gather information in order to better ascertain the

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truth. Try to interact with people who have a different political view than you do—and when you do, listen to understand.

These are concrete steps that can be taken, but much of what needs to be done is in the realm of attitudes. As Havel put it,

In its most original and broadest sense, living within the truth covers a vast territory whose outer limits are vague and difficult to map, a territory full of modest expressions of human volition, the vast majority of which will remain anonymous and whose political impact will probably never be felt or described any more concretely than simply as part of a social climate or mood. Most of these expressions remain elementary revolts against manipulation: you simply straighten your backbone and live in greater dignity as an individual. [\(Page 136\)](#)

Straightening our backbones and living with greater dignity as individuals—a day at a time, an act at a time—is sound advice when it comes to repairing the damage America has sustained.

Words as Instruments of Persuasion and Reason

“Politics and the English Language” was published in 1946 in the journal *Horizon* and is perhaps George Orwell’s most famous and during essay. In it, he argues that the English language has become disfigured and degraded, “Ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.” Language, particularly political language, is not just a manifestation of our decline but also an instrument in it.

The important thing to understand is that what Orwell is aiming for is *clarity*. He wants language to be more precise, an instrument to express rather than conceal thought—or prevent it—and he’s quite right about that.

Orwell’s thoughts on *political* language merit particular attention. “In our time,” he wrote, “political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible.” Political language consists largely of “euphemism, question-begging, and sheer, cloudy vagueness.” He added, “Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

One senses in Orwell his frustration with the state of political speech because it often degrades what he considered precious—language—because it warped reality and the true nature of things, and [\(Page 137\)](#) because he understood the enormously high stakes in politics. If we get politics wrong, Orwell knew, it can lead to misery and suffering, to gulags and concentration camps. “Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written directly or indirectly *against* totalitarianism,” he said, “and *for* Democratic Socialism as I understand it.”

Orwell believed political language matters because politics matter, that the corruption of one leads to the corruption of the other. He believed language was a means to see the truth and to tell the truth. He believed, too, in a moral code, in concepts like justice and objective truth. “The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command,” wrote Orwell in *1984*.

[Winston Smith’s] heart sank as he thought of the enormous power arrayed against him, the ease with which any Party intellectual would overthrow him in debate, the subtle arguments which he would not be able to understand, much less answer. And yet he was right! They were wrong and he was right. The obvious, the silly, and the true had got to be defended. Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth’s center. With the feeling that he was speaking to Obrien, and also that he was setting forth an important axiom, he wrote: *Freedom is the freedom to say two plus two is four. If that is granted, all else follows.*

The challenge of our time is to rediscover our best ends and noblest purposes. We can’t give up on the belief that human beings are [\(Page 138\)](#) rational and reasonable, that evidence and logic matter, and that persuasion is possible. The human condition is such that things are rarely all of one and none of the other, and certainly in this case, the pendulum swings from moments of connective trust and calm reason to collective mistrust, emotivism, and rancor. In the world today there is pacific New Zealand on the one hand, and war-torn Syria on the other. In America there was the “era of good feeling” in 1815-25 and the Civil War in the 1860s, the placid 1950s and the raucous, angry late 1960s.

A lot of different factors—internal and external, domestic and international, economic and social—influence a nation’s political and civic culture. And we all know, deep in our bones, that so does political leadership and rhetoric. We need to stand with men and women in public life who believe, as Lincoln did, that words can be instruments of reason and justice, repair and reconciliation, enlightenment and truth. Who are willing to challenge not just their adversaries but their allies, not just the other political tribe but their own. And who are willing to make a compelling case for deliberative democracy and persuasion.

“The posturing and pontification we find in our messy public discourse are neighbors to a genuine democratic good—the practice of persuasion” writes Yale political science professor Bryan Garsten.

In addressing our fellow citizens directly, we make an effort to influence them, not with force or threat or cries, but with articulated thoughts that appeal to their distinctly human capacity for judgement. In trying to persuade, we attend to their opinions without leaving behind our own, and so we try somehow to combine ruling and being ruled in the way ([Page 139](#)) that democratic politics requires. While neither as powerful nor as ubiquitous as rhetoricians themselves might claim, persuasion is nevertheless a real possibility in democratic life, and it is a possibility that we ought to protect.”

Indeed, it is, and indeed we should. We have to reclaim our language in order to reclaim our politics.