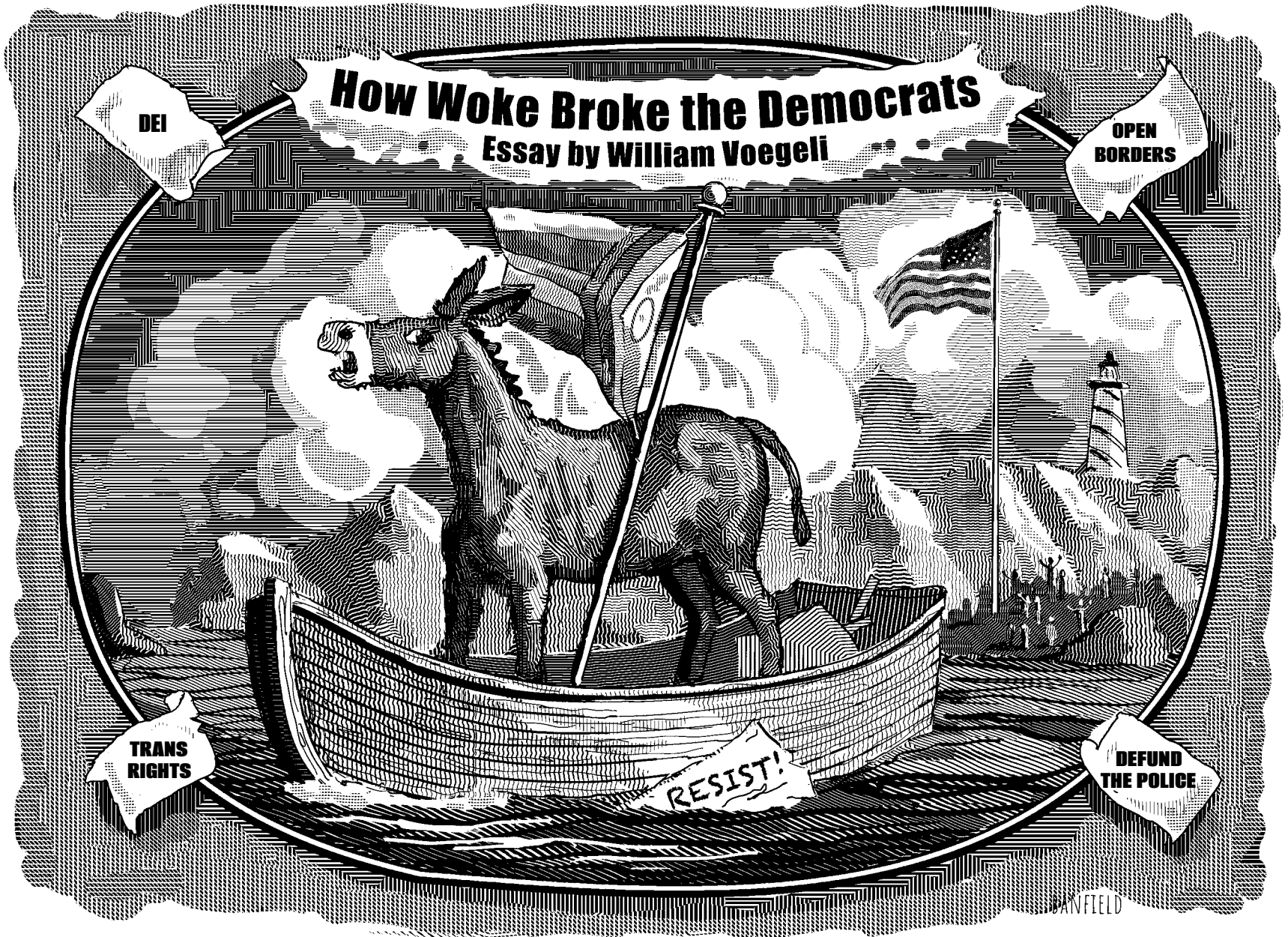


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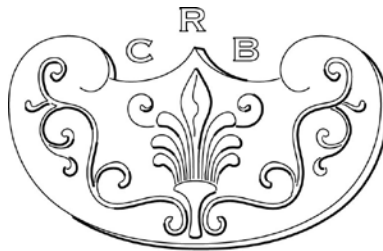
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Essay by William Voegeli

NOW WHAT?

The Democratic Party after 2024.

IN POLITICS, AS IN LIFE, WINNING IS BETTER than losing. But some losses are worse than others. An especially damaging defeat creates a situation that is both hard to endure and hard to change.

This is the Democratic Party's dilemma after the 2024 election: It suffered a bad defeat. An important cause of that defeat was that the party had embraced and become identified with a social justice ideology that offends more voters than it attracts. To become more politically competitive by becoming less politically correct is, under the circumstances, clearly advisable but also highly improbable.

A Win Is a Win

FIRST, THE ELECTION. REPUBLICANS retained a majority in the House of Representatives, with a 220- to 215-seat advantage, after a net loss of two seats. By gaining four seats, the GOP also captured control of the Senate with a workable but not dominating 53-47 majority. Finally, the party won the presidency with a 49.8% to 48.3% popular vote plurality and won 58% of the Electoral College: 312 electoral votes to the Democrats' 226.

Politically, America remains closely divided: a "49% nation," as Michael Barone called our polity after the 2000 election. The narrowness of the Democrats' loss, however, does not fully reflect its severity. In addition to carrying all seven "swing states"—Arizona,

Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—Donald Trump turned a 4.5% Democratic advantage in the nationwide 2020 popular vote into a 1.5% Republican advantage in 2024. A six-point shift over four years is unimpressive by the standards of the 20th century, when presidential politics was played between the 35-yard lines, with a large portion of the electorate in play every election cycle. For example, after winning the presidency by a 22.6% popular-vote margin in 1964—22.4 percentage points better than in 1960—the Democrats went on to lose it by 0.7% in 1968 (a swing of 23.3 percentage points), then lose again by 23.2% in 1972 (a 22.5-point swing), regain it by 2.1% in 1976 (25.3), and lose it once more by a margin of 9.7% in 1980 (11.8). In the 21st century, however, presidential politics has been played between the 45-yard lines, without any double-digit swings from one election to the next. Six points is a significant improvement by recent standards, a larger shift than any since Barack Obama turned the Republicans' 2.4% advantage in the 2004 popular vote into a Democratic margin of 7.2% in 2008.

Moreover, Trump's gains between 2020 and 2024 were widely distributed, in terms of both geography and demography. He improved his margin in all 50 states. (That is, he either lost the state by a smaller margin than he had in 2020, won it by a larger margin, or, in six cases, flipped a state that Joe Biden had carried.) States that were once reliably Dem-

ocratic, such as the "blue wall" of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, have grown competitive. Other states that were competitive have gotten redder and redder. Obama, for example, won Florida, Iowa, and Ohio in 2008 and again in 2012. Trump has now won each state three times with, in 2024, 56.1%, 55.7%, and 55.1% of the vote, respectively.

Trump improved his margin, compared to 2020, in 2,793 counties, 89% of the total. In "majority minority" counties, where fewer than 50% of the residents are white, he did 8.7 percentage points better in 2024 than in 2020, after having improved 1.3 points in such counties between 2016 and 2020. Among the 11% of the 2024 electorate that was Hispanic, Trump received 46% of the vote, according to exit polls, an improvement on the 28% he won in 2016 and 32% in 2020. Trump won 57% of white voters in 2016 and again in 2024, which means his improvement over those eight years came entirely from non-whites, winning 21% of their votes in 2016 and 33% in 2024.

The loss of these votes is harmful to the Democrats' electoral calculations, but also to the party's image of itself. The activist Van Jones spoke for many Democrats on Election Night 2016 when he said on CNN that Donald Trump's victory was a "whitelash against a changing country" and "against a black president." Eight years later, the distribution of votes undermines this indictment of Trump and his coalition, not to mention the vision of the Democrats as avatars of multicultural in-



clusion and harmony. *The New York Times*, in a strikingly peevisish news analysis published one week before the 2024 election, deplored Trump's growing appeal to non-white voters. Titled "How Trump Exploits Divisions Among Black and Latino Voters," it lamented Trump's success in gaining support by recognizing something that "Black and Latino activists have privately acknowledged for years: The presumed solidarity between both groups is fragile and may be splintering again." The most galling fact to the *Times* was that "polling shows that Trump supporters are far less likely than Harris supporters to say that being Hispanic or Black is important to their personal identity." In other words, America First appeals strongly to voters who consider themselves Americans first.

Whatever the smartest assessment of the size of the Republicans' 2024 victory, the fact remains that a win is a win. The GOP emerged from Election Day with a "trifecta," control of the White House and both houses of Congress, something that was common in American politics for most of our history but has grown increasingly rare since World War II. In addition, six of the nine Supreme Court justices were nominated by Republican presidents. Though they don't always vote together, none of the six can be termed a successor to Earl Warren, William Brennan, Harry Blackmun, John Paul Stevens, or David Souter, justices nominated by Republican presidents who spent decades on the bench as reliable members or even leaders of the Court's liberal bloc, allied with justices elevated by Democratic presidents. *The New Republic's* Matt Ford lamented that, by reelecting Donald Trump while giving the GOP a Senate majority, voters in 2024 "guaranteed that all but the youngest of them will live under a deeply conservative high court for the rest of their lives." This configuration of the federal government's three branches leaves the Democratic Party institutionally weaker in 2025 than it has been at any point since 1930.

Fighting Uphill

BUT EVEN THAT'S NOT THE WORST OF it. For Democrats, though Donald Trump's 2016 victory had been ghastly, 2024 was alarming. Democrats could take some comfort from indications that 2016 was an anomaly, one that did not augur all that badly for the party. For one thing, Trump votes that year were arrayed on the map with freakish efficiency, allowing him to capture an Electoral College majority despite receiving nearly 2.9 million fewer votes than his opponent. What's more, over Hillary Clinton's

quarter-century on the national stage, Democratic voters, politicians, and journalists had lost sight of the fact that, as a politician, she was neither talented nor popular. "The big challenge of this whole race was there were so many voters who were ungettable," according to the autopsy delivered by one Clinton advisor, as reported in Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes's *Shattered: Inside Hillary Clinton's Doomed Campaign* (2017). Just enough Americans in 2016, voting in just enough swing states, were in a foul enough mood about the entire political class to give the benefit of the doubt to a celebrity candidate who had never previously held nor sought public office.

But by 2024, no Democrat could imagine that people voted for Trump without knowing what they were signing up for. He had been the central figure in American politics for nine years, during which the volume and intensity of Democratic invective against him grew steadily. The "MAGA philosophy," President Joe Biden said in 2022, is "like semi-fascism," filled with "anger, violence, hate, and division."

Discussed in this essay:

Where Have All the Democrats Gone?: The Soul of the Party in the Age of Extremes,
by John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira.
Henry Holt and Co., 336 pages,
\$28.99 (cloth), \$20.99 (paper)

We Have Never Been Woke: The Cultural Contradictions of a New Elite,
by Musa al-Gharbi. Princeton
University Press, 432 pages, \$35

In the 2024 campaign, Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee, dropped Biden's "like" and "semi." "Do you think Donald Trump is a fascist?" she was asked at an October town hall. "Yes, I do," Harris replied. Voters, she continued, care about "not having a president of the United States who admires dictators and is a fascist." And the attacks were not just political but personal, often bitterly so. A pre-election *New Yorker* essay by Adam Gopnik, a writer more often hinged than unhinged, called Trump a "distinctively vile human being and a spectacularly malignant political actor."

None of this made a difference. The vitriol was, if anything, counterproductive. As the Trump critics' oeuvre grew larger and more vehement after 2015, Trump's electoral showings against three different opponents steadily improved. He received 63 million votes in 2016, 46.1% of the total, 74 million in 2020

(46.8%), and 77 million in 2024, 49.8% of all votes. As a result, "the Democratic party—having lost twice, under different conditions, to a candidate that has fundamentally and fatally confounded so many of the assumptions shaping their approach to politics—is at a point of crisis," as Osita Nwanevu wrote in the British newspaper *The Guardian*.

The two simplest explanations for this failure to avert the national catastrophe Democrats had inveighed against are each bad for the party. One is that voters, aware of the case against Trump, also considered the source, which they found not credible. The other is that, whatever their misgivings about Trump, a plurality of voters in 2024 judged the Democratic alternative to be even worse.

These theories are consistent with the election returns. According to exit polls, Kamala Harris won self-identified Democratic voters by 95% to 4%, and independents by 49% to 46%. Trump carried Republican voters by 94% to 5%. Political analyst Henry Olsen calculates that Harris's performance would have been good enough to secure victory in every presidential election from 1932 through 2020. It was not good enough in 2024, however, because her large slices were carved from smaller pies. Republican voters constituted 35% of the electorate in 2024, compared to 34% who were independents and 31% who were Democrats. This advantage in party identification is, notes Olsen, the biggest the GOP has enjoyed since Babe Ruth played right field in Yankee Stadium. If it persists or grows, he adds, Democrats will have to reacquire the ability to "fight uphill," which had been unnecessary even in the Eisenhower and Reagan eras.

The idea that the 2024 vote was against Democrats at least as much as it was for Republicans also aligns with recent public opinion surveys. A Harvard Harris poll of registered voters taken the week before Trump's 2025 inauguration showed that respondents' approve/disapprove split was 52/48 for the Republican Party, and 41/59 for the Democratic Party. A Quinnipiac University poll taken just after Trump's inauguration found a favorable/unfavorable split of 43/45 for the GOP, compared to 31/57 for the Democrats. The twelve-percentage-point Democratic deficit in favorability ratings is the highest since 2008, when Quinnipiac began including the question in its surveys.

Insanity Defense

A PRIVATE ENTERPRISE WHOSE BRAND was significantly less popular than its main competitor's would be forced to take drastic steps. But even in business, which



is supposed to be agnostic about how profits get made, so long as they get made, myopia and inertia exert great force. “That’s not who we are” and “That’s not how we do things” have no *logical* power but a large psychological impact. It is otherwise difficult to explain why, in 2000, Blockbuster summarily rejected an offer to buy a startup called Netflix for \$50 million. Netflix, now among the world’s most valuable corporations, has a market capitalization exceeding \$400 billion. Blockbuster went the other direction. After peaking in 2004 with over 9,000 retail outlets that rented and sold videotapes and DVDs, the company filed for bankruptcy in 2010.

A political party is as susceptible as any business to the human failings of being shortsighted and complacent. But to these a party adds unique complications of its own. Its internal debates over which politician, group, or cause to blame for an election defeat are, at bottom, protracted campaigns by each element of the party’s coalition to avoid any responsibility or consequences. Two things that can both be true, then, are: 1) the Democratic brand has been damaged by close association with the social justice agenda, terminology, and worldview, which are highly popular with the subset of voters who identify as progressives, but which mystify and offend a much larger portion of the electorate; and 2) social justice adherents will insist on any and every *other* explanation for the Democrats’ 2024 defeat and 2025 quandary before they admit the possibility that their own words and deeds are an important reason for the party’s damaged brand.

It is true, of course, that there will be several independent variables that have some significant explanatory power in a close national election with over 152 million voters. The toxic mix of hubris and cognitive decline that led Joe Biden to seek reelection to a term that would have kept him in the presidency beyond his 86th birthday put the Democrats at a disadvantage, one that even a nominee more capable than Kamala Harris would have struggled to overcome. And voters were angry about the economy. According to exit polls, 33% of them believed that economic conditions were “poor.” Of that group, 88% voted for Trump. Another 35% said the economy was “not so good,” 52% of whom voted for Trump. In other words, the 68% of the electorate that gave the economy low marks provided Donald Trump with 47.2% of the popular vote, nearly the entirety of the 49.8% he ended up with.

But voters not only view presidential candidates through the lens of the economy. They also view the economy through the lens of

their judgments about the competing candidates and parties. Some portion of the 47.2% of the electorate who thought the economy was in bad shape and voted for Trump felt economic conditions were objectively bad. Some other portion, having arrived at a negative view of the Biden-Harris administration *in general*, stopped giving Democrats the benefit of the doubt about gray-area aspects of the economy.

This consideration leaves open the possibility that the Democrats’ identity as the social justice party played a significant role in their 2024 defeat and subsequent travails, a hypothesis further supported by polling data. In the days immediately following the election, the Democratic polling firm Blueprint released a study weighing various reasons that account for people voting against Kamala Harris. Participants were given random pairs of reasons from a list of 25 possi-

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ble arguments against the Democratic ticket. The reason chosen most often in such face-offs had the highest score; the one taken least often the lowest. On this basis, Blueprint assigned “Inflation was too high under the Biden-Harris administration” a score of +24, since it was the preferred option in 74% of the binary trials, 24 percentage points more than random chance would predict. Coming in a close second (+23) was “Too many immigrants illegally crossed the border under the Biden-Harris administration.” Winning the bronze medal, with +17, was “Kamala Harris is focused more on cultural issues like transgender issues rather than helping the middle class.”

The impact of cultural issues on the election is even greater than this study’s raw score would suggest. Blueprint points out that while the cultural issues criticism finished third among all voters, it finished first, with +25, among swing voters, and first (+28) among

swing voters who ultimately voted for Trump. The Trump campaign would not have made a heavy commitment to running its most resonant ad—which began with footage of Harris endorsing taxpayer funding for gender reassignment surgery for “every transgender inmate in the prison system,” and concluded with the tag line “Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you.”—if Trump advisors doubted that high visibility for the ad was moving the needle in their favor.

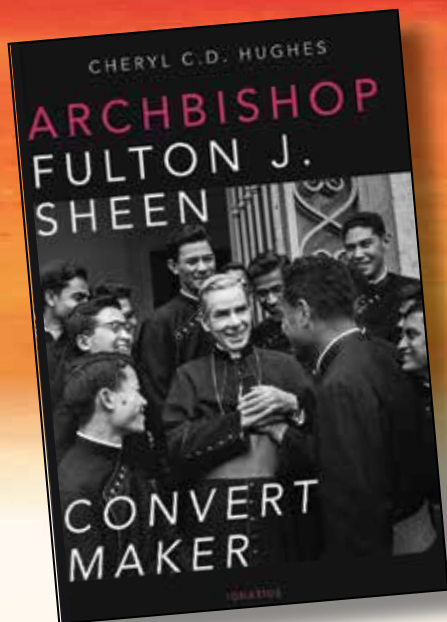
There is also a significant overlap between immigration and cultural questions as campaign issues. The most direct link, mentioned in the “they/them” ad, was that Harris, as a presidential candidate in 2019, had also endorsed taxpayer-provided gender transition surgery for people held in “immigration detention,” to use the term provided by the ACLU questionnaire her campaign filled out: “I support policies ensuring that federal prisoners and detainees are able to obtain medically necessary care for gender transition, including surgical care, while incarcerated or detained,” was Harris’s response.

More broadly, the woke belief that immigration restriction was immoral and illegitimate figured heavily in Biden Administration policies that curtailed border enforcement, especially through executive orders Biden signed in 2021. Predictably, “[i]llegal border crossings soared to record levels under President Biden, averaging 2 million per year from 2021 to 2023,” as *The Washington Post* reported in July 2024. Also predictably, 15.6% of the U.S. population is now foreign-born, a higher percentage than at any point during the Ellis Island era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

When Joe Biden and then Kamala Harris prepared to face the voters and confront the fact that, as political analyst Ruy Teixeira wrote on Substack in October 2024, “Loosening restrictions on illegal immigration was a terrible idea and voters hate it,” border enforcement finally went up and border crossings went down. Even this eleventh-hour course correction elicited denunciations reflecting the social justice thinking that had been crucial to the Biden Administration’s policies in the first place. “Immigration is good. We should consider ourselves lucky to have had so much, and we should strive to have more,” journalist Felipe De La Hoz wrote in *The New Republic* in September 2024. “This psychopathic and—you can say it—white supremacist fixation on punishment and control of migration is not just a moral stain but a disastrous economic policy.”

In “The Democrats’ Insanity Defense,” a pre-election essay for *Tablet* magazine, jour-

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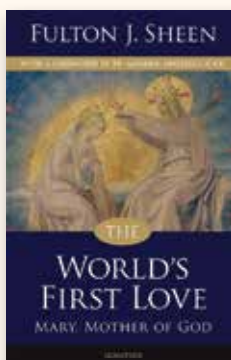
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nalist Park MacDougald said that demands and rhetoric like De La Hoz's had become so common and so extreme that it even caused a problem for Republicans. "When you outline the Democratic agenda, you have to water it down, because in both polling and focus groups, people just don't believe it," one Republican campaign advisor told MacDougald. "They are critical of things like boys in girls' sports, but they tune out stuff about schools not informing parents about transitioning their children. They just don't believe it's true."

And despite formulaic, facile railing against white supremacy, the 2024 results argue that it is woke whites who are notably arrogant and out of touch. In a post-election article for *The Guardian*, columnist John Harris cited polling data showing that black and Hispanic voters are more favorably disposed than white progressives to such propositions as "most people can make it if they work hard" and "government should increase border security and enforcement." "Growing chunks of the electorate," Harris concludes, "are not who the left thinks they are." Which cannot help but be a serious problem for the Democratic Party since, in Harris's words, the "most vivid element" in a comprehensive account of Trump's victory "is about the left, and one inescapable fact: that a lot of people simply do not like us."

Power and Purpose

IN THE AFTERMATH OF AN ELECTORAL DEFEAT, a party's two goals—acquiring power, and furthering the causes for which the party seeks power in the first place—are in conflict. Since the election returns indicate the unpopularity of the party's basic commitments, as the public perceives them, staying the course is likely to result in future defeats. But to jettison or even modify those commitments also runs serious risks. The party might antagonize or demoralize its base, and wind up losing more supporters than it gains. And even if a tactical or messaging shift leads to election victories, the return to power will constrain the party's pursuit of objectives it still cares about.

Thus, defeats usually set off internal contests, often heated. After all, a major political party is, in reality, a diverse, often contentious coalition of numerous entities, pursuing various goals by various means. At the center are elected officials themselves, whose reputations, ambitions, and political careers depend on striking the right balance between securing power and vindicating preferred uses of that power.

The early signals from the 262 Democrats serving in the 119th Congress are that, de-

spite the GOP's 2024 victories, the social justice cause retains a secure place in the Democratic Party. One of the first orders of business in January 2025 was a Republican priority, the Laken Riley Act, named for a 22-year-old nursing student murdered in 2024 by an illegal immigrant, which requires the federal government to detain any migrant charged with or arrested for violent crimes, theft, burglary, or assaulting a law enforcement officer. Over 70% of the Democrats in each chamber voted against the bill, which became the first one that President Trump signed into law in his second term. Of the twelve Democratic senators who voted for it (35 were against), nine were from states that Trump carried in 2024, with another two from New Hampshire, the state he lost most narrowly. In the House, 48 Democrats voted for the bill, 159 voted against, and eight abstained. (No Republican in either chamber voted against it.)

The vote for the Laken Riley Act by one Democratic House member, Ritchie Torres, serving his third term from a district in the Bronx, was no surprise. The day after the 2024 election, Torres had posted on X:

Donald Trump has no greater friend than the far left, which has managed to alienate historic numbers of Latinos, Blacks, Asians and Jews from the Democratic Party with absurdities like "Defund the Police" or "From the River to the Sea" or LatinX. There is more to lose than there is to gain politically from pandering to a far left that is more representative of Twitter, Twitch, and TikTok than it is of the real world. The working class is not buying the ivory-towered nonsense that the far left is selling.

Not only is Torres outnumbered in the Democratic caucus, but even colleagues who do share his thinking are reluctant to antagonize the party's social justice vanguard. Congressman Adam Smith, who has represented a district in the Seattle area for 28 years, recently told *The New Yorker* that the Democratic Party's biggest problem is that too many of its policymakers "spend too much time pushing an extreme left ideology by policing language on things like pronouns, what given ethnic groups should be called and in general reeducating everyone about the evils of capitalism and all the systemic failures of America over the course of 400 years." Yet Smith voted no on the Laken Riley Act, making a case against it that was more vigorous than rigorous: "That's a horrible use of our resources,

and terrible policy. I'm not going to vote for terrible policy just to make it appear that I'm not in favor of the left."

A Strong Shadow

AN EVEN ANGRIER ATTACK ON THE Laken Riley Act came from Sarah Dohl, chief campaigns officer of the social justice organizing group Indivisible. "Spineless," she said, was "the only word" for congressional Democrats who helped advance the legislation. She also called the bill "a racist, xenophobic attack on immigrants that shreds constitutional rights," adding, "It's not just cruel—it's a train wreck of chaos and bad faith."

Ms. Dohl is not a politician in the sense that congressmen like Torres and Smith are. Yet she is clearly *in* politics, with a leadership position in a 501(c)(4) non-profit that spent \$12.8 million, according to its most recent available tax return, to "elect progressive leaders, rebuild our democracy, and defeat the Trump agenda," in its website's description. *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?* (2023), by John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, discusses "shadow parties," a term it defines as "the activist groups, think tanks, foundations, publications and websites, and big donors and prestigious intellectuals who are not part of official party organizations, but who influence and are identified with one or the other of the parties." The Democratic shadow party, according to Judis and Teixeira, includes:

donors from Wall Street, Hollywood, and Silicon Valley, think tanks like the Center for American Progress and the Peterson Institute, foundations like Ford and George Soros's Open Society, political groups like the Working Families Party, the Human Rights Campaign, and Black Lives Matter, publications like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *New Yorker*, media networks like MSNBC, substackers, bloggers, and tweeters, and hundreds of smaller groups headquartered in the postindustrial metro centers and college towns who often communicate through social media.

There is also a Republican shadow party. *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?* mentions the Koch Network, Turning Point USA, Fox News, and the Claremont Institute as parts of it. But the asymmetry is more pronounced than the symmetry. For one thing, the constitutive elements of the Democratic shadow party are far wealthier and more prominent



than their GOP counterparts. The Ford Foundation endowment is \$16 billion, for example, compared to the \$987 million held by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. Harvard University's endowment, \$53.2 billion, dwarfs that of Hillsdale College, \$972 million. With more than 11 million subscribers, *The New York Times* not only has a far larger audience than Fox News, which averaged 2,384,000 prime time viewers in 2024, but has an unmatched capacity to influence the form and substance of the nation's political debates.

The Democratic shadow party is not only more formidable than its Republican counterpart but wields greater power within its own party's coalition. (Republican politicians and voters pay less attention to intellectuals, including Republican ones.) We might say that the Democratic shadow party is strong enough to cast a shadow of its own. This matters in the aftermath of 2024 because the disparate elements of a shadow party are alike in having the latitude to care more about ideological purity than political victory. Indeed, in every sector of the Democratic shadow party described by Judis and Teixeira, it is better for one's reputation and career to put forward maximal claims that advance favored causes than to recommend caution and compromise out of respect for the limits of public opinion.

Idealistic professors, crusading writers, activists like Sarah Dohl from organizations that want to raise funds for "cutting-edge" projects, donors who want the gratification and admiration that come from funding such endeavors—all have compelling reasons to disdain half-measures and the people who pursue them. Better, in this view, to suffer a noble defeat than to secure a shabby victory.

The shadow party, then, is at the heart of what former Vermont governor Howard Dean, during his 2004 presidential campaign, hailed as the "Democratic wing of the Democratic Party." So far, the Democratic shadow party has given every indication that losing a national election to a man Democrats have denounced as a monster does not require, and must not induce, the party to recalibrate its commitment to social justice. The shadow party is determined to fight on this line because: a) it can; and b) the people who populate it really, really want to.

Conspicuous Compassion

WHY THEY WANT TO IS THE SUBJECT of *We Have Never Been Woke: The Cultural Contradictions of A New Elite*, by sociologist Musa al-Gharbi. Published one month before the 2024 election, the book examines those whom al-Gharbi

calls "symbolic capitalists." That is, rather than concentrate on producing and acquiring material wealth by rendering goods and services, these are people whose place in society depends primarily on prestige, recognition, and the deference of others. Examples of the professions where these considerations predominate include "academics, consultants, journalists, administrators, lawyers, [and] people who work in finance and tech." This group is now the Democratic Party base. Divide the electorate by income segments and Kamala Harris did best among the 13% of all voters who had a household income of at least \$200,000, winning them 52% to 46%. Divide it by educational attainments, and she won voters with a postgraduate degree (19% of the total electorate) by a landslide, 59% to 38%.

Al-Gharbi relates that he got the idea for writing his book in 2016 when, as a recently arrived graduate student at Columbia University, one of the country's most prestigious, selective, and expensive schools, he observed the large numbers of students and faculty who were too distraught after Donald Trump's election victory to complete assignments or hold classes. It occurred to him that the dog that didn't bark was that none of these progressive champions of the marginalized and exploited gave any thought to Columbia's support staff, especially the largely black and His-

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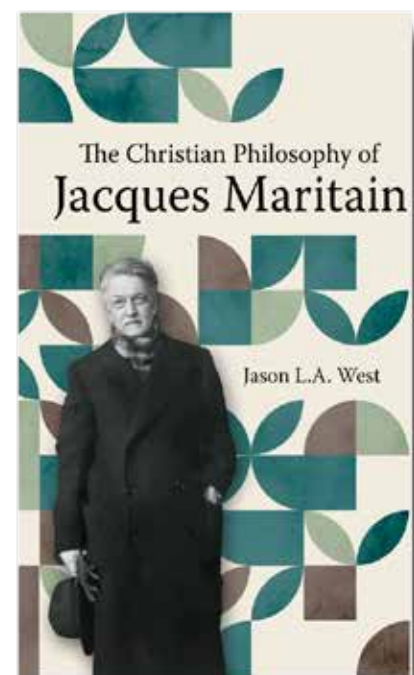
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panic workforce that prepares students' meals and mops their buildings' hallways. Might they also have been upset about the election, and in need of some time and space to reflect and gather themselves? No one seems to have asked. Instead of receiving days off to attend support-group sessions, however, these hourly workers did just what the entire campus took for granted: they clocked in the morning after Election Day and began their labors.

We Have Never Been Woke argues that, for symbolic capitalists, social justice is not just a political cause but also a shrewd, advantageous way to get on in the world. According to the Thorstein Veblen classic, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, the key to status competition in the Gilded Age was "conspicuous consumption." Al-Gharbi argues, in effect, that the key to status competition in the Internet Age is conspicuous compassion. Wokeness has become "a key source of cultural capital among contemporary elites," he writes, allowing them to be seen as interesting, sophisticated, and empathetic, a reputation that is not only good in itself, but good for the tangible rewards it confers in career and social advancement. This makes sense to conservatives, who assume that anyone who claims to take seriously the idea of 74 genders must have ulterior motives. But al-Gharbi contends that there is no conflict between sincere commitment to a political viewpoint and taking advantage of the life enhancements afforded by that commitment. As a rule, he argues, "symbolic capitalists likely believe the things they say." Yet it is simultaneously true that "liberals exploit social justice advocacy to make *themselves* feel good, but ultimately offer up little more than symbolic gestures and platitudes to redress the material harms they decry (and often exacerbate)."

For example, the professions that progressives have come to dominate, such as law, medicine, higher education, grant-making foundations, non-profit organizations, and journalism, are accorded legitimacy and prestige based on their "claims to altruism and serving higher principles or the public good." Since the Progressive era, the widespread acceptance of these claims has provided "the basis for the high levels of pay, prestige, deference, and autonomy that symbolic capitalists enjoy." It makes perfect sense that people who aspire to join and advance in these careers would make deploring social injustices a core component of their professional and personal identities. You don't advance in the conspicuous compassion status competition by volunteering in a soup kitchen. It is far better to take a global view, to be compassionate toward millions rather than dozens of sufferers, and then to perform well-compensated work as an academic, journalist,

or activist explaining how these victims suffer as the result of vast, complex, systemic forces, which can be defeated only by vast, complex, and comprehensive remedies, programs that will not succeed unless administered by other well-compensated professionals.

In modern America, al-Gharbi writes, highly educated people "are much more likely than others to know what positions they 'should' hold in virtue of their partisan or ideological identities, and we're more likely to align our beliefs to systematically accord with those identities." The process selects for people who turn in their homework on time, intuitively decode the unwritten rules of the game, and cultivate mentors and allies who can help them get ahead. Moreover, the growing problem in recent decades of "elite overproduction"—too many Ph.D.s chasing too few tenure-track teaching jobs; the game of musical chairs for journalists as media outlets downsize or close—creates incentives to em-

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brace and express ever more strident, sweeping versions of the social justice worldview.

Al-Gharbi's critique of the symbolic capitalists is from the left, though he does not really upbraid them for failing to be better leftists, nor sketch out what a better Left would look like. We—he includes himself, an assistant professor at Stony Brook University—"have never been woke" in the sense that progressives' denunciations of inequalities were never meant to be even minimally effective despite, or in some cases because of, being maximally assertive. *The* engine driving social justice activism, al-Gharbi observes, is "frustrated erstwhile elites condemning the social order that failed them and jockeying to secure the position they feel they 'deserve.'" Under these conditions, symbolic capitalists "grow much more aggressive in mobilizing social justice discourse to paint themselves as worthy of power and wealth—and to declare their adversaries and rivals as undeserving of

the same." These preoccupations render social justice egalitarianism simultaneously radical and trivial. *We Have Never Been Woke* approvingly quotes two leftist professors who wrote, "The implication of proportionality as the metric of social justice is that the society would be just if 1 percent of the population controlled 90 percent of the resources so long as 13 percent of the 1 percent were black, 14 percent were Hispanic, half were women, etc."

The struggle for status and security within the professions dominated by social justice concerns also stresses the need to anathematize wrong-think and its dangerous, poorly educated, misinformed, mean-spirited adherents. To voice the idea that controversial issues like immigration enforcement and gender identity are ones decent and reasonable people can disagree on is a grave career misstep for the adjunct professor, public interest lawyer, or cleric in a declining Mainline Protestant denomination. High on the list of things that the woke are awake to is the critical importance of loudly condemning deviations from social justice orthodoxy.

Thus, the Wednesday after Election Day 2024, Gilberto Hinojosa, chairman of the Texas Democratic Party, said in a public radio station interview that his party would have to choose: "You can support transgender rights up and down all the categories where the issue comes up, or you can understand that there's certain things that we just go too far on, that a big bulk of our population does not support." By the end of the day, Hinojosa had apologized on social media: "I recognize the pain and frustration my words have caused. In frustration over the G.O.P.'s lies to incite hate for trans communities, I failed to communicate my thoughts with care and clarity." By the end of the week, he announced his retirement after twelve years as chairman.

The Nation Hates the Nation

SCOTT JENNINGS, THE TOKEN RIGHT-wing troublemaker on CNN shouting matches, recently observed that Donald Trump's "superpower" consists in getting on the 80 side of "80-20 issues." As a rule, this superpower requires nothing more than unwrapping gifts the Democratic Party delivers to him when it proudly lays claim to the 20 side of those issues. According to an Ipsos poll taken in January 2025 for *The New York Times*, 79% of Americans oppose allowing athletes who were born male but currently identify as female to compete in women's athletic competitions. Among respondents who are Democratic voters, 67% oppose this practice. Seventy-one percent of Americans, in-



cluding 54% of Democrats, favor prohibiting doctors from prescribing puberty-blocking drugs or hormone therapy to minors between the ages of ten and 18. Eighty-seven percent of all respondents support, and 66% strongly support, deporting immigrants who are in the United States illegally and have criminal records. Eighty-three percent of Democratic voters support such deportations, including 49% who strongly support it.

To keep swimming against such currents requires strong convictions, bolstered by the implicit but powerful understanding that these convictions confer significant psychological and material benefits. Every indication since November 2024 is that the Democratic shadow party is up to the task.

Its least prudent but most candid response came in the immediate aftermath of the 2024 election. Several commenters argued that Trump's win vindicated the most fevered denunciations of American society as "a matrix of interlocking oppressions situated on stolen land," pervaded by "Eurocentric cisheteropatriarchal institutions and practices," in essayist Wesley Yang's summary on X, one of those parodies of woke-speak indistinguishable from the real thing. The 2024 election was, in this view, a chance for American voters to meet the most basic standards of decency and civic competence, a test they failed miserably. "We, as a nation, have proven ourselves to be a fetid, violent people, and we deserve a leader who embodies the worst of us," Elie Mystal wrote in *The Nation*. Trump won because he "saw us for how truly base, depraved, and uninformed we are as a country."

Another *Nation* columnist, Kali Holloway, wrote the month after the election that Trump's victory "means those of us who voted for Harris weren't betrayed by the archaic, undemocratic Electoral College but by our neighbors, our coworkers, and the strangers we pass on the street." The month before the election, Holloway had written a *New Republic* cover story, "America Is So Ready for Kamala Harris," which explained that "momentum [was] on Harris's side" because she had "brought together a diverse swath of voters who share an eagerness to get beyond the toxic divisions that have plagued the country since the rise of MAGA." By December Holloway was blaming herself for having underestimated America's inherent "racism and misogyny," which has repeatedly culminated in its violent rejection of "multiracial democracy."

"What is wrong with America?" asked Sunny Hostin of ABC's *The View* on the day after the election. "What is wrong with this country that they would choose a message of divisiveness, of xenophobia, of racism, of mi-

sogyny, over a message of inclusiveness?" Two *New York Times* columnists watched Donald Trump's victory speech on Election Night, then filed paraphrases of the same column. "Stop Pretending Trump Is Not Who We Are," was the title of Carlos Lozada's. He urged readers to disabuse themselves of the comforting notion that Trumpism is a "temporary ailment," when it is better understood as a "pre-existing condition." "This Is Who We Are Now," was the title of Michelle Goldberg's, who wrote of her desire to "block out the humiliating truth about what my country has decided to become."

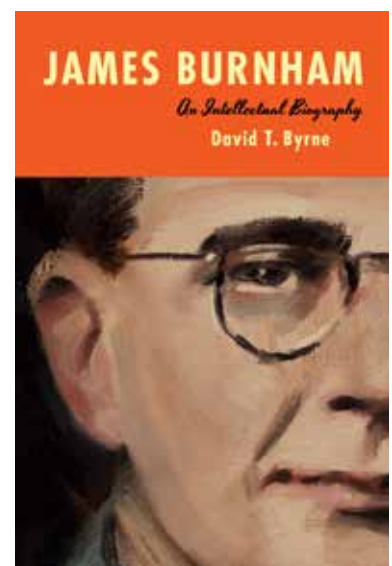
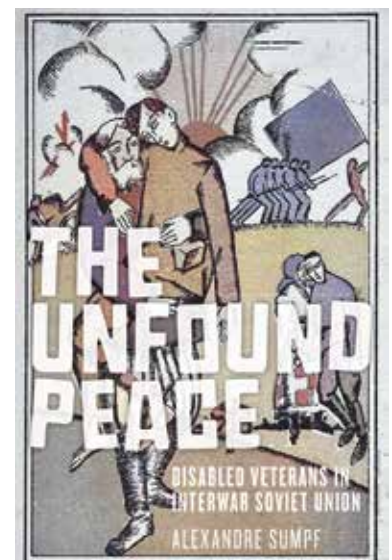
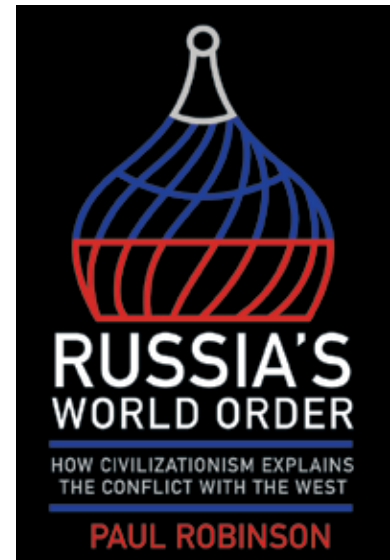
A political party is not a suicide pact, so it will ultimately repudiate a shadow party whose electoral strategy is to lecture voters about how hateful they are. But a party can resist, for a long time, concessions to noxious realities about popular opinion. The Democratic Party had to lose three straight presidential elections in the 1980s before it turned to Bill Clinton, a nominee who spoke centrism fluently and, as president, intermittently walked that walk.

One fascinating element in the coming story of how quickly and sharply the Democrats course-correct after 2024 involves President Trump's success in draining the swamp. He appears serious about achieving in his second term the transformations that eluded him in his first: eradicating offices of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in government, business, and non-profits; defunding public broadcasters; ending public subsidies for leftish non-profit organizations; and re-democratizing the administrative state. Should Trump succeed bigly, one collateral effect will be that Musa al-Gharbi's symbolic capitalists will face a far more severe problem of elite overproduction, since there will be significantly fewer prestigious, comfortable positions available for the highly credentialed, aspiring elitists who feel entitled to them.

If most respond to increased competition by intensifying their commitment to social justice, the disjunction between what the Democratic Party feels compelled to say and what the American people want to hear will become even more acute. Another possibility, however, is that elite overproduction will become so serious that many people decide to get out of that competition altogether in order to pursue livelihoods that depend on the quality of the goods or services they produce, rather than burnishing their personal brand. This development would pose a different sort of danger for the Democratic Party, since it sounds like a description of the base of the Republican Party under Donald Trump.

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