

“History teaching, national myths, and civil society”

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ABSTRACT

One of the critical issues facing Historians today has been the emergence of Strong State regimes and the politicized pseudo history they produce in countries claiming to adhere to democratic norms. The attack on the Capital of the United States was based on a series of lies about voter fraud supported by President Donald Trump and members of Congress. Countering ideology based on a complete disregard for truth is now of paramount importance in the United States. This paper studies Trump’s promise to Make America Great Again (MAGA) as a further evolution of Lost Cause mythos that began after the Civil War. The original story casts the enfranchisement of African Americans as a failure touting white supremacy and the righteousness of Jim Crow laws. How can History teachers counter these highly politicized myths? I suggest that the methodology of our profession may provide us with some important tools. John Dewey underscored the importance of critical inquiry to the preservation and advancement of democracy. Teaching students how to think historically goes a long way in the process of producing citizenry who are ready to participate in civil society. To that end I conclude this essay with a course that I teach entitled “Witches, Aliens, and Other Enemies.” The course is designed to set moments of mass hysteria and paranoia in the American narrative against the background of reason and rational legal law utilizing the Salem witch hunt at the end of the seventeenth century and the “red scare” following World War II as case studies to stimulate student exploration.

KEYWORDS

national myths, historical interpretation, democracy

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INTRODUCTION

One of the critical issues facing Historians today has been the emergence of Strong State regimes and the counter narratives that support State diktat while claiming to adhere to democratic norms. One has only to look at the events leading up to the attack on the Capital of the United States on January 6, 2021, and the rationale for the attack that was based on lies and paranoia supported by President Donald Trump and members of Congress to understand the danger posed to the Republic. Countering ideology based on a complete disregard for the truth is now of paramount importance here in the United States.

In spite of the Congressional vote to impeach the President Trump on charges of instigating insurrection, with the House of Representatives voting 232-197 and the Senate vote of 57-43 to convict, the two thirds threshold to convict was not reached. According to a January 15, 2021, ABC/Washington Post poll nine out of ten Americans opposed the attack on the Capital and seven out of ten believed that Donald Trump held at least some responsibility for the attack (Langer, 2021). And yet, thirty five percent of Americans don't trust the recent election results (Santhanam, 2021). Part of this has been due to a near constant campaign by Trump and his allies to spread disinformation about American politics and law. Trump began asserting early in his presidential campaign in 2020 that if he lost it would be due to fraud and a corrupt electoral process. The endlessly repeated lie was debunked by his own Justice Department and yet continues to hold sway among a substantial number of the American polity as revealed by polling. It provides a frightening example of the effectiveness of techniques perfected by Joseph Goebbels and Adolph Hitler in their endless calumnies about Jews and other "enemies of the people" (a term also embraced by Trump to describe American main-stream Press). His embrace of the violent far right extremist group the Proud Boys is only a recent iteration of his deep affection for white supremacy and neo fascist ideology. His attempts to gather conservatives to his extremist base can be epitomized by his remarks about a White Riot in Charlottesville Virginia on August 12, 2017, where he objectivized the virulent racism espoused as being as important as those condemning it. Completely absent was any discussion of civic virtue. His comment conjured the still raw memories of America's Jim Crow South. The Confederate battle flags that were carried into the Capital on January 6 underscore this point. We have been here before and the myth of the lost cause that evolved after the American Civil War makes clear how damaging this type of pseudo-history can be to the polity. How can History teachers and our profession counter the power of national myths, especially in the highly politicized environment that we now find ourselves? How do we encourage and prepare our students to be active members of the civil societies in which they belong? I have no definitive answers but suggest that the methodology that informs our great profession may provide us with some important tools.

BACKGROUND

The myth of the "Lost Cause" developed over time as a reaction to the federal victory over the south which ushered in what are known as the Civil War amendments, XIII, XIV, XV, to the Constitution. These amendments ended slavery, defined citizenship guaranteeing equal access to the law including African Americans and ensured citizens the right to vote. In this light, Abraham Lincoln's words at Gettysburg that the war would usher in a "new birth of freedom"



were vouchsafed. An attempt to institutionalize these new freedoms were begun during Reconstruction. Slavery had been the principal cause of the American Civil War and many southern elites viewed these newly expanded civil rights as a threat to political order and an upending of racial hierarchies established over the long course of slavery in the North American continent begun in 1619. For example, in wake of the proposed Fourteenth Amendment in 1866 white policemen along with former confederate soldiers rioted in Memphis, Tennessee for three days that left forty-one African Americans dead and destroyed eighty-nine houses, four churches, and twelve schools of the Black community (Epps, 2006). For writers such as the former Confederate General Jubal Early the Civil War was transformed into a battle over State's Rights with those in rebellion claiming legitimacy from their Revolutionary War Forebearers. The struggle was cast as a heroic struggle against overwhelming odds. Ultimately, in a view adopted by many in the north the heroic character of the war had only fortified the virility of the nation. This narrative largely writes African Americans out of the narrative and consigns slavery to the sidelines. According to the myth slaves had been well cared for by their masters and the ending of slavery had left them unprepared for real independence. In this light, African American participation in politics during Reconstruction had been a tragic mistake that led to disaster. The underlying racism and deliberate misrepresentation of the Civil War embodied by the Lost Cause legitimized eugenics and a deliberate campaign to exclude African Americans from civil society. Films such as *Birth of a Nation* went as far as to promote the Ku Klux Klan as saviors and preservers of the nation (Blight, 2001). Historians cast abolitionists as agitators and radicals at the margins of politics (Brooks, 2018). Not surprisingly, Civil Rights activists and freedom movement politics have frequently been cast as radical to this very day.

Historian Carole Emberton has asserted that in spite of substantial rethinking on the part of our profession examining the American Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Freedom Movement there remains substantial pushback from a public understanding of this history that continues to cling to stories of the "Lost Cause" (Emberton, 2016). Popular history of the Civil War is reinforced by reenactors who attempt to recapture the spirit and times of this tumultuous past. Reenactors are interesting characters in and of themselves whose minute knowledge of the equipment and dress of Civil War soldiers may be unrivaled, but whose knowledge of the context and consequences of the war is often studiously avoided which by default or design reinforces the unifying narrative of the "Lost Cause" as a "quarrel forgotten" (Horwitz, 1999). Our continued struggle to separate history from memory and its ensuing myths are epitomized by events such as Pickett's Charge on July 3, 1863, that ended the Battle of Gettysburg. The myth of the heroic struggle began with the South trying to reconcile the defeat and the catastrophic casualties that resulted from the battle but became emblematic of Southern valor in the aftermath of the war. In the myth of the "Lost Cause" it became the high-water mark of the Confederacy. This idea can be found not only in monuments that attest to this "fact," but in the numerous gift shops that surround the National Park (Reardon, 1997). The Lost Cause suited many interests within the American polity. Sidelining African Americans in politics served those in both the north and south who wanted to maintain a racialized hierarchy in fear that white economic stability would be undermined by newcomers. This sentiment was fortified by new waves of immigrants from Europe and Asia. Voices such as the Abolitionist and Civil Rights Activist Frederick Douglass who challenged the Lost Cause myth and its utility to white Americans were increasingly drowned out. In a speech given in Boston on 7 December 1869 he claimed,



“There are such things in the world as human rights. They rest upon no conventional foundation, but are external, universal, and indestructible. Among these [is] the right of migration...which belongs to no particular race...”

Douglas advocated for an America that would be a composite nation, opening itself up to the possibilities created by peoples migrating to the United States after the American Civil War. He claimed that it was a human right for peoples to migrate as they sought shelter from hardships and insults offered up by homelands that no longer provided a secure mooring for them. In his generous definition of nationalism, he claimed that if Americans were to welcome those from distant shores, in this case the Chinese migrating to California, the newcomer would learn to love the institutions Americans held dear, most especially those values of the Liberal Republic enshrined in the Constitution. Importantly, new migrants would bring new strengths that would only enhance America’s burgeoning economy. American institutions would thus be fortified, not destroyed by migration (Douglas, 1869). His speech foreshadows and epitomizes the welcoming words by Emma Lazarus emblazoned on a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty,

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, the tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door” (Lazarus, 1883).

Douglas connected the fate of newly freed African Americans to that of the Chinese as both groups faced daunting hostility from a significant part of the American polity who claimed that “This is a white man’s country,” which stood as the slogan for the Democrats during the 1868 Presidential election. Resistance to Reconstruction was a constant and extremely violent feature of American life from the ending of the American Civil War through the “Southern Manifesto” that underscored massive resistance to integration set off by *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954 (Chernow, 2017; Cunningham, 2013; Foner, 1998; Foner, 1988; Kluger, 1975).

American economic prowess on the global stage coupled with a taming of the West seemed to promote the United States as an exceptional nation whose ideas and energies were derived from a white northern European heritage and ushered in a more militant nationalist sentiment. This political tide that foreshadowed eugenics and the “White Man’s Burden” ultimately prevailed over the idea of a Composite Nation and had the effect of institutionalizing segregation through Jim Crow and stymieing the migration of people of color through the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882 and ultimately the Johnson Reed Act, 1924 all undergirded by an expanded version of Lost Cause mythology.

Immigration to the United States was severely curtailed and the exclusion of people of color was seemingly vouchsafed. It should be noted that 1925 witnessed the March of over 20,000 Ku Klux Klansmen and women in Washington D.C. Violence as a means of ensuring compliance with Jim Crow and nativist sentiment was epitomized by the unyielding violence of lynching and incidents such as the Tulsa, Oklahoma riot of 1921. The Tulsa riot, May 31–June 1, 1921, perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan burned down thirty-five blocks of the African American Greenwood section of the city and claimed the lives of approximately three hundred people (Tulsa Historical Society, 2021; Madigan, 2001). Interestingly, “The Statue of Liberty” that had welcomed close to 14 million immigrants between 1886 and 1914 became a National Monument in 1924 standing in sharp contrast to the reality of Johnson Reed which limited total immigration to 165,000 per year (Immigration Act of 1924).



Even in the light of atrocities carried out publicly against the Jews and political enemies of the Third Reich and its allies, Americans only grudgingly began to make changes to their immigration laws (Cesarani, 2016; Dobbs, 2019; Wyman, 2007, 1984). The accounting of the horrors perpetrated by the Third Reich and the Empire of Japan seriously eroded support for the pseudo-science of eugenics and began to undermine American support for exclusionary immigration policy. This provided the legitimacy for the major extension of liberal democratic principles as exemplified by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 10 December 1948. Articles 13 and 14 explicitly define the freedom of movement as an essential human right. For example, 13.2 states “Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.” Importantly for this paper, Article 14.1 asserts, “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” These basic human rights are undergirded by assertions regarding freedom of expression and opinion found in Articles 18 and 19, and finally the assertion that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate to the health and well-being of himself and his family” in Article 25 (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

The legitimacy provided by the United Nations endorsement of human rights and migration unfortunately remained an elusive ideal rather than a reality for most people in the global system. Cold War contingencies seemed to argue for a less than robust welcome to those demanding national liberation in the colonial world. In the United States the McCarran Walter Act of 1952 ended Asian exclusion, but at the same time maintained the national origins system found in the Johnson Reed [Immigration] Act of 1924. The new act provided a quota system based on one sixth of one percent of each nationality in the United States in 1920 and continued to favor immigration from Northern and Western Europe by a margin of 85 percent (McCarran Walter Act of 1952). The hopefulness provided by the Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education* that ended segregation in the United States at the same time fortified fierce resistance by racists and nativists determined to resist what they viewed as an illegitimate intrusion by the federal government into the politics that maintained white superiority in the United States. The politics of “slow down” and “wait” in the name of the emergency of the Cold War couldn’t continue forever. The furies had been unleashed and the ensuing violence made many long for more peaceful and orderly times. Martin Luther King warned during the SCLC fight to desegregate Birmingham that only “nonviolent direct action” would force the community to seriously negotiate for an end to the status quo of segregation (Fairclough, 2001).

A UTILITARIAN MYTH FOR A WOULD-BE STRONGMAN

The passage of the Civil Rights Act, 1964 and the Voting Rights Act, 1965 seemed to indicate that a legal consensus had emerged that was consonant with the *Brown* decision, in this light, historians viewed the Post World War II civil rights movement as the fulfillment of the Civil War amendments. But political consensus has remained elusive. Historian Garrett Epps argues that too few Americans recognize that their understanding of individual rights stems from the broad reassessment of rights after the American Civil War, especially as found in the Fourteenth Amendment (Epps, 2006). On 12 August 2017 at a White Supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, a car was used to kill one protester and injure thirty-five other counter protesters. The white supremacists were in Charlottesville to protest the possible removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee that had been erected in 1924. The symbolism was lost on no one. Donald Trump



claimed that the event included “very fine people on both sides” and is emblematic of an approach to history that recalls the white nationalist sentiments of the 1920’s and Lost Cause mythology that offered a sympathetic picture of the Ku Klux Klan (Graham, Green, Murphy, & Richards, 2019).

Donald Trump came to power in 2016 loudly proclaiming that he would force the Republic of Mexico to pay for a border wall to keep Mexicans and other Central Americans from illegally crossing into United States territory. On Twitter, Trump likened migration from the south as “the Attempted Invasion of Illegals.” Personifying them as criminals and rapists certainly helps fan the flames of white supremacists who believe that the influx of people of color will lead to their extinction. On 3 August 2019, a shooter claimed the lives of 22 people asserting that he was defending against a “Hispanic Invasion of Texas” (Peters, Grynbaum, Collins, & Harris, 2019).

But the depth of this fear reaches further than those on the fringe. For example, while a Pew Research Center study showed that a majority of American’s believe that race and ethnicity shouldn’t be considered in hiring and promotions, it showed that “three in ten Americans would be bothered to hear a language other than English in public.” The number rises when political affiliation comes into play. According to Pew “about half of white Republicans” would be bothered by a foreign language being spoken. Pew also found that there is no consensus among Americans when asked about the impact of having a non-white majority in the United States by the year 2050 (Horowitz, 2019, Parker, Morin, & Horowitz, 2019). Impugning African States as “shithole countries” and damning political opponents as somehow being outside of the American polity only stokes these uncertainties and fears among Trump’s principal base of support. On the campaign trail Trump actively questioned whether Barak Obama was an American citizen. In an interview his deputy national security advisor for communications, Ben Rhodes said, “Without Bitherism there is no Trump presidency” (Graham, et al., 2019; Rucker & Parker, 2019).

Trump’s promise to “make America great again” is based partly on deregulation of private industry that he promises will bring back jobs in the Automobile industry and unlikely sectors such as coal. The Great Recession certainly aided in the economic uncertainty facing many Americans with a marked increase in the disparity of wealth between the middle and upper classes, while debt and an inability to save mark many lower income households (Kachhar & Cilluffo, 2017). Questions as to whether deregulation has had a positive impact or that relaxed environmental standards pose significant dangers to human health are dismissed as being based on “fake science or fake news.” Trump views the media as being politicized and has consistently branded them as an “enemy of the people” (Vogel & Peters, 2019).

Like in Hungary, George Soros provides a human face for a globalized enemy that would undermine the state. He has not only financed politicians that oppose Trump’s version of unregulated neo liberalism, but actively supports research and academic endeavors that contradict claims of fake science and fake news. In this light, his “vilification” is transnational (Vogel, Shane, & Kingsley, 2018). Though Trump would make it seem that the financing of globalism is slanted towards the seemingly perverse efforts of forwarding civil society and reason, Bryan Burrough in his review of Christopher Leonard’s new book on Koch industries points out that the Koch brothers lobbying efforts have had a major impact on environmental regulation and politics in the United States (Burrough, 2019).

A series of Executive Orders put into place by the Trump administration detained refugees and migrants in conditions that violate both domestic and international standards and law. In



one facility shut down at the end of July 2019, 350 children were detained in conditions where basic requirements for food and sanitation were not being met. Children were sleeping on the floor and suffering from exposure to extreme heat and cold. Seven children have died while in American custody or directly thereafter (Holpuch, 2019). The purposeful disregard for the law has characterized the Trump administration since the presidential campaign itself. Though not a legal requirement, Trump has consistently refused to release his tax returns reversing a tradition begun by Richard Nixon. He was finally forced to do so in February 2021 by New York State, but whether this will lead to criminal charges remains unknown. The demonstrated meddling of the Russian Confederation along with Trump's closeness to Russian oligarchs including Vladimir Putin raise very serious questions about his campaign and personal finances. These questions ultimately resulted in a first vote to impeach Trump on charges of Abuse of Power and Obstruction of Congress by the House of Representatives on 18 December 2019. Although the Senate acquitted him of the charges 52-48 on 5 February 2020, Trump's consistent lack of cooperation with the oversight functions of Congress raise questions about his interpretation of the separation of powers integral to a liberal republic.

The Presidential campaign was overshadowed by the Covid 19 pandemic which had already reached American shores by 2020. Trump's disregard for scientific evidence was on full display marked by the lack of a centralized effort to thwart the virus at a national level. Trump continued to hold mass rallies disregarding basic public health precautions such as wearing masks or social distancing. Not surprisingly many within his own inner circle including himself contracted the virus. The difference being the treatment accorded to him versus ordinary Americans. To date close to half a million Americans have died leaving the Biden administration in a position of playing catch up in order to contain the virus (Davidson, 2021). Looming large as well throughout 2020 was the fallout from the death of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin who knelt on his neck ultimately asphyxiating him while he plead for his life crying "I can't breathe." Protests erupted in Minneapolis and across the United States in more than 140 cities. The National Guard was activated in 21 states in response to violence. White supremacists played a significant role enflaming passion as they decided this was their moment to aid in the suppression of the protests. Black Lives Matters spearheaded many of these rallies and were repeatedly denounced by Donald Trump who seemed to concur that violence was the remedy when he claimed on 29 May 2021 that the military could use force to suppress the protests calling protestors "thugs" and warning "When the looting starts, the shooting starts" (Taylor, 2021).

COUNTERING MYTH

John Dewey underscored the importance of critical inquiry to the preservation and advancement of democracy. Teaching students how to think historically goes a long way in the process of producing citizenry who are ready to participate in civil society (Dewey, 1916, 1963). History is dependent on critical inquiry without which our profession becomes a recitation of facts and susceptible to political intrigue...let alone becoming an astonishingly boring topic. The Social Psychologist Erich Fromm warned us that the citizen must be able to individuate and challenge authoritarian group think to preserve rational legal order (Fromm, 1941). Though we do not face the immediate danger that Fromm faced in Germany we are



threatened by a substantial part of the polity that is disconnected from history and therefore the valuable lessons provided by our study of the past. The classroom may be one of the places where we can counter the authoritarian and exclusionist tendencies that I have described earlier.

Several years ago, I developed a history course for freshmen in the College's General Education program entitled "Witches, Aliens, and Other Enemies" drawing inspiration from Arthur Miller's, *The Crucible*. The course is designed to set moments of mass hysteria and paranoia in the American narrative against the background of reason and rational legal law. I utilize Richard Godbeer's *The Salem Witch Hunt* and Ellen Schrecker and Phillip Deery's *The Age of McCarthyism* along with a wide range of documents and films to get at this problem and what follows is a brief overview of what we do in the course (Godbeer, 2018; Schrecker & Deery, 2017).

We start with the Salem Witch hysteria of 1692 set in the context of the Atlantic World and the Age of Reason. Puritans demanded the Rights of Englishmen, but only on their terms at a time when their world was rapidly changing as exemplified by events such as the Glorious Revolution. For the Puritans, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was besieged by Satan and his pals as exemplified by indigenous peoples acting as surrogates in the struggle for empire between France and England, the environment, and a host of unbelievers including Quakers and Antinomians. All of these factors coupled with a new colonial Charter demanding the toleration of all Protestants threatened to overturn the Puritan idea of a "City on a Hill." The desperate search for the enemy within led to the juridical murder of twenty people before the trials were finally shut down.

I try to get the students into the mindset of the Puritans through a series of exercises two of which stem from film. The first exercise asks the students to watch the first several scenes from the feature movie, *The Witch*, 2015 directed by Robert Eggers in which a baby mysteriously disappears from a family banished from their Puritan community. Students are asked to explain "who done it?" based on their knowledge of the Puritans and the world they lived in. After the students have gotten into witch accusations and discussions about who was being accused of witchcraft I have them watch "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street," Season 1, Episode 22, 1960 from Rod Serling's television series *The Twilight Zone*. In this episode aliens demonstrate how easy it is to create panic among humans. Out of fear of an unknown enemy the community turns against itself imploding into a murderous fury. How does the movie utilize some of the same fears and motivations that informed the Salem Witch Hunt? Why do neighbors need to search for the enemy within? What are the telltale signs that someone has become a danger to the community? Finally, I have the students accuse me of witchcraft.

The exercises are designed to enable students to play with history all the while getting a sense of how to understand perspective and point of view writing. The context of the story helps students to both understand the Puritan's fears and English impatience with the colony for not paying closer attention to mercantilist interests of England let alone King William's War that was playing out at the same time as the Puritan hunt for enemies within. This is followed by an examination of Voltaire's *Candide*, John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, and the Declaration of Independence in order to contrast the burgeoning demand for rational legal order in a world where reason was only slowly making headway against traditions and institutions based on belief. How do these ideas undergird our understanding of order and reason? The stage is then set



for the second part of the course where we examine Senator Joe McCarthy's search for the enemy within and the substantial political reaction that followed the second "red scare."

We start this part of the course with a discussion about the tensions set off by the conflicting American impulses towards laissez faire capitalism and egalitarianism as exemplified by labor organizing and the demand for Civil Rights in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. How are these events related to the first red scare? From here we move into the Great Depression, World War II, and the uneasy relationships developed between the United States, the Soviet Union, and a colonized world demanding national liberation. The Soviet threat described by Harry Truman on 12 March 1947 provided the backdrop for Federal Bureau of Investigation Director J. Edgar Hoover to trumpet his near paranoid warning about communist infiltration in the United States to the House Un American Affairs Committee on 26 March 1947. His testimony coupled to Truman's dramatic warning to the American people set the second red scare into full motion. Governmental institutions were used to break the American Communist Party as well as to attack Hollywood and intellectuals. How did Atomic Bombs, Espionage, and the establishment of the People's Republic of China play into Joe McCarthy's hands? At what point was the hunt for "enemies of the people" turned against political enemies and legitimate dissent?

We examine how dissent originating from political targets in the Civil Rights movements and labor turned into a robust critique and rejection of the second red scare. Comparing and contrasting Arthur Miller's *Crucible* provides a way to understand dissent in the 1950's and compare and contrast the play with the actual witch hunt of 1692. What role does reason play in both events? Finally, my students write a final exam essay after watching the fantastical *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 1956, directed by Don Siegel. How does the film portray post World War II unease in the United States? What happens if we fall asleep? Why do neighbors feel the need to search for the enemy within? How does this story accord with the red scare we have just examined let alone the Salem Witch Hunt? The exercise is fun and at its best gets students to analyze the contrast between reason and fear and perhaps the most important question, what happens when we fall asleep and accede to our fears?

CONCLUSIONS

Teaching this course during the context of Trump's presidency led to many interesting discussions about fear and the retreat from reason, let alone democracy. Come to find out the tools of our trade are transferable. Studying "responsible adults" adhering to superstition and hearsay in the face of evidence to the contrary is both amusing to my students and an abject lesson in civic responsibility. Donald Trump promised to make America great again based on a mix of aggrievement about our contemporary world that was based on a myth of what had come before, all anchored in the "Lost Cause." The rational legal state outlined by the American Constitution creates a structure that enshrines democratic procedure, but at the same time attempts to ensure that a simplistic interpretation of majoritarian democracy does not undermine the essential values that enshrine free speech, free assembly, free press, and equal access to the law (Berman, 2019; Schupmann, 2017). Trump has demonstrated a lacking commitment to the norms of liberal civil society. According to political scientist Michael Walzer, these liberal values [norms] are essential to democratic society, anything else is a



sham. While liberal principles of citizenship and allegiance to the polity are uncomfortable, as they demand allegiance to rational legal law, they are essential to prevent an authoritarian form of government. They are uncomfortable principles, as they protect all through the law including those who are different from us. They demand participation and an active engagement with civil society, which entails dialogue not its intimidation (Walzer, 1992). According to Seymour Martin Lipset, it is just those principles that make the American liberal model exceptional (Lipset, 1963).

Though in reality by no means perfect, it is the American idea of rational legal law, or liberalism, that informs international law and norms. To retreat from these principles undermines the very idea of the post-World War II world. It is indeed the International Declaration of Human Rights that provide us with our contemporary understanding of democratic norms. To walk away from these norms enables Trump and his allies to claim that these norms are foreign to the polity and are meant to undermine the State. Importantly, the Commonwealth of Russia has claimed that liberal civil norms are a “fifth column” meant to undermine authentic national values. The fact that these attacks on liberal values stem from its nemesis Vladimir Putin should cause concern (Pomerantsev, 2016; Rutzen, 2016).

Trump’s momentum to overturn the liberal norms of the Republic were slowed down by institutions that have had over 240 years to develop. The current investigation of the insurrection will hopefully give pause to those attempting another try. But the power of lost cause mythos and its seemingly endless variations call on us to not simply debunk these claims but to explain to the public why they are vacuous. Utilizing methodology in the classroom that turns our students into sleuths who can empower themselves by utilizing evidence and method to challenge authority might be one place to start.

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