

History Repeats Itself: First as Farce, Then as Tragedy

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Donald Trump has won the 2024 presidential election. That means that we will have to fight many of the battles of 2017-2020 all over again. But first, in order to understand the scale of what we're up against, let's look at how we got here.

The Hot Potato Changes Hands Again

We have long argued that in the 21st century, state power is a hot potato. Because neoliberal globalization has made it difficult for state structures to mitigate the impact of capitalism on ordinary people, no party is able to hold state power for long without losing credibility. Indeed, over the past few months, upset defeats have undermined ruling parties in France, Austria, the United Kingdom, and Japan.

In the 2024 election, both Kamala Harris and Donald Trump were already tarnished by their relationship with state power, but Harris was the one associated with the reigning administration. This is one of the reasons she lost. Tens of millions of Trump voters support his program, yes, but the voters who pushed him over the edge into victory were essentially casting protest votes.

The Democrats have done everything they could to associate themselves with the ruling order: moving their politics to the right, shifting support away from supposed "leftists" within their ranks, demobilizing protest movements. It turns out that this was a losing wager at a time when people are hungry for change.

It remains to be seen how the rest of the country will respond. If the leadership of the Democratic Party are able to roll over and accept a position as the junior partners in fascism, the future could be bleak indeed. On the other hand, if it becomes clear that half the country is going to resist the Trump program, some part of the Democratic leadership will be forced to chase after their position as the representatives of that part of the population, as occurred in 2017.

What happens next will be decided in the streets.

The Party of Complicity

The Republicans have become the party of fascism. In the run-up to this election, the Democrats established themselves as the party of *complicity with fascism*.

What does it mean to acknowledge that Donald Trump is a fascist, and yet do no more than urge people to *vote* against him? If indeed, Trump intends to introduce fascism to the United States—if, as he has explicitly promised, he will round up millions of people ("the largest domestic deportation operation in American history"), put the military on the streets to suppress protests, and use the court system to attack anyone who opposes him—then limiting oneself to merely *electoral* opposition means welcoming fascism with open arms.

When fascism is on the way, the appropriate thing to do is to organize underground networks of resistance, as Italian and French anti-fascists did in the 1920s and 1930s. The appropriate thing to do is to prepare to resist by *any means necessary*. Anything less is complicity.

Beefing up the institutions through which the fascists will enact their policies is complicity. Normalizing violence against the people that the fascists intend to target is complicity. Turning over the communications platforms via which people share information is complicity. Discouraging people from the kind of tactics one needs to fight against a fascist regime is complicity. Over the past four years, the Democrats have done every single one of these things.

The Democratic party leadership is already prepared to coexist with fascists, to be *ruled* by fascists. They would prefer fascism to another four years of tumultuous protests. Having a more authoritarian party in power gives them an alibi—it makes them look good by comparison, even as they are the ones channeling people out of the streets and paving the way for Trump to carry out his program.



The Road to Fascism

Let's spell out why the Democrats are culpable for this situation.

The Police

The Democrats began the Biden-Harris era by doubling down on their support for the police, precisely when millions of people around the United States were wondering whether it was time to look for a more effective way to address poverty and mental health crises than to continue channeling massive quantities of public funding towards militarizing police departments. When Trump takes office again in 2025, the police departments around the country that the Biden administration has funded and glorified will be at the forefront of imposing Trump's agenda.

The Democratic Party's pro-police turn helped bring ex-cops like New York City Mayor Eric Adams into office in 2020. Adams's administration has been a disaster; he is currently the first Mayor of New York to face federal charges, including bribery, conspiracy, and fraud. Trump has since reached out to Adams, one corrupt strongman to another. This is what happens when you put state power directly in the hands of the forces of repression.

The Law

Starting early in the first Trump administration, Democrats focused their criticism of Trump on the idea that what he was doing was *illegal*, using the slogan "No one is above the law." As we argued in 2018,

If you're trying to establish the foundation for a powerful social movement against Trump's government, "no one is above the law" is a self-defeating narrative. What happens when a legislature chosen by gerrymander passes new laws? What happens when the courts stacked with the judges Trump appointed rule in his favor? What will you do when the FBI cracks down on protests?

Now, with the Supreme Court controlled by Trump appointees and Trump preparing to resume power, we will see the answers to these questions. Anyone who is determined to prevent Trump from carrying out his agenda will have to be prepared to break the laws that Trump's legislature will pass and Trump's judges will apply.

To march under the banner "no one is above the law" is to spit in the faces of all those for whom the daily functioning of the law is an experience of oppression and injustice. It is to reject solidarity with the sectors of society that could give a social movement against Trump leverage in the streets. Finally, it is to legitimize the very instrument of oppression—the law—that Trump will eventually use to suppress your movement.

As we warned last July, a Trump victory means that all the institutions that centrists have counted on to protect them—electoral politics, the court system, the police, ordinary citizens' inclination to obey the law and respect the authorities—are now weapons in the hands of their enemies.

The Media

When the owners of Twitter sold it to Elon Musk in 2022, they understood that they were putting control of the 21st century's chief political communications platform in the hands of a far-right megalomaniac. One of the first things that Musk did was to ban some of the most well-known anarchist accounts that had helped to mobilize people during the first Trump administration. This was a step in the process of reducing Twitter to a vehicle for far-right propaganda.

As we argued at the time,

Musk's acquisition of Twitter is not just the whim of an individual plutocrat—it is also a step towards resolving some of the contradictions within the capitalist class, the better to establish a unified front against workers and everyone else on the receiving end of the violence of the capitalist system.

Indeed, the funding of a coterie of billionaires was one of the chief factors that enabled Trump to win the 2024 election. The billionaires were able to shift their loyalties to Trump in part because, with communication platforms and street protests brought under control, they did not have to fear that a second Trump administration would create chaos that would be bad for business.

This brings us to the next point.

Emptying the Streets

The Democrats' effort to discredit and demobilize the movement against the police played directly into the hands of their adversaries, preparing the way for Trump to return to power without resistance.

By competing with the Republicans to assert themselves as the party of law and order, the Democrats enabled the Republicans to drive discourse about "crime" so far to the right that Trump and his henchmen could run on rhetoric about crime even though violent crime has been decreasing for years. This contrasts dramatically with the way that Donald Trump refused to dial his talking points back one millimeter.

At the same time, Democrats have sought to prevent new movements from gaining momentum. When abortion access was curtailed around the country, for example, the Democrats did their best to prevent an effective grassroots mobilization in response.

Did it benefit the Democrats' 2024 electoral prospects to empty the streets? Let's go back to 2020 for an answer.

At the time, in op-ed after op-ed, centrists expressed concern that the street confrontations of May and June 2020 might swing the election to Donald Trump. In fact, Democratic voter registration in June 2020 increased by 50%, while Republican voter registration grew by just 6% that month. Those who cited the protests as a factor in determining how they cast their ballots in 2020 voted for Joe Biden by a margin of fully 7%.

In other words, the George Floyd Revolt helped get Biden elected.

And remember—the George Floyd Revolt did not begin with a voter registration drive. It got off the ground with the burning of a police precinct. According to a *Newsweek* poll, 54% of those surveyed believed that this was justified. If that had not occurred, the movement would not have succeeded in pushing the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others into public discourse, and there would have been no electoral gain for the Democratic Party. There is no way to create powerful movements without taking real action against the causes of injustice.

As the party that coopts resistance movements, the Democrats would have benefitted from more powerful movements in 2021-2024. They preferred to lose.

The Political Ratchet

The Harris campaign received the support of former President George W. Bush, former Representative Liz Cheney, conservative talk-radio host Charlie Sykes and many other right-wing figures. This was not just because Trump's agenda was shocking even to those who previously represented the face of the Republican establishment—it was also because Harris represented a centrist political project, letting Republicans determine the discourse on issues like immigration.

As we have previously argued,

The US two-party system functions like a ratchet, with the Republican Party steadily pulling public policy and permissible discourse to the right while Democrats, in seeking to acquire power by chasing the political center, serve as a mechanism that prevents policy and discourse from shifting back.

This strategy has helped Republicans normalize what were once marginal ideas about immigration and crime, but it has not made the Democrats any more electable.

To pan back, we can see that Trump's victory in 2024 marks a crucial turning point in 21st-century political discourse. When Trump was elected in 2016, the neoliberal consensus seemed invincible; his victory seemed to represent a fluke in which an outlier politician had come to power by coopting the rhetoric of the so-called anti-globalization movement. Today, it is clear that the heyday of the neoliberal consensus is over and something else will have to come next. Yet for decades, the Democrats have collaborated with Republicans to crush movements proposing an alternative. They suppressed the forces within their camp, such as the Bernie Sanders campaign, that represented a way forward; this was what made it possible for Trump to falsely present himself as a representative of rebellion.

This has rendered it inevitable that the far right will hold power in the next phase, since the Democrats helped to suppress anarchist, anti-authoritarian, and left alternatives.

Desensitizing the Public

Finally, heartbreakingly, the Biden administration has already done much of the work to desensitize the general public to the program that an emboldened second Trump administration will attempt to carry out. Above all, the Biden administration has accomplished this by supporting the Israeli military in carrying out a brutal genocide in Gaza. In so doing, Biden and Harris have accustomed millions of people to the idea that human life has no inherent value—that it is acceptable to slaughter, imprison, and torment people based on their status in a targeted demographic.

This is exactly the sort of environment that will enable Donald Trump to carry out the kind of brutal domestic policies that he intends to when he returns to office in two and a half months.



The Road Ahead

Ultimately, we cannot blame the Democrats for everything. We are the ones who failed to build movements powerful enough to survive their efforts to suppress us. We are the ones who are as yet unprepared to stop Trump from deporting millions of people and channeling billions of dollars more to billionaires and the security apparatus of the state.

Fortunately, this story is not over yet.

We have a responsibility not to let the election statistics demobilize us. As we wrote in 2016, in response to Trump's first victory,

Elections serve to represent us to each other at our worst, distilling the most offensive, cowardly, and servile aspects of the species. Many people who would never personally wrest a mother from her children are capable of endorsing deportation from the privacy of a voting booth, just as most people who eat meat could never work at a slaughterhouse. Were it not for the alienation that characterizes government itself, most of the ugly policies comprising the Trump agenda could never be implemented.

There will be a brief window of possibility now when millions of people who had counted on the Democrats to keep them safe wake up and realize that we are each other's only hope. We have to take action immediately to make contact with each other, to reestablish all that we have lost since the year 2020.

We have to undertake proactive projects that will distinguish us from the political parties, projects that show what *everyone* has to gain from our proposals, and that offer opportunities to people from all walks of life to get involved in the project of changing the world for the better.

The good news is that we can do this. We've done it before. See you on the front lines.

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