



IT IS TIME TO PUT POLICY DIFFERENCES ASIDE AND FOCUS ON PRESERVING OUR DEMOCRACY

During a webinar with business leaders, organized by the [Business and Democracy Alliance](#) (a collaboration among Leadership Now Project, Black Economic Alliance and Public Private Strategies) this past week, former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin and former Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of American Express Ken Chenault asked rhetorically, would you hire Donald Trump as an employee, or enter into a business partnership with him or have him serve on a public company board? And, assuming the answer is no, why do so many business leaders feel comfortable entrusting him with arguably the most powerful job on the planet.

How to explain support for a candidate who was the first in American history to refuse to accept defeat. Trump took affirmative steps to overturn the results of a presidential election and prevent the peaceful transfer of power. Earlier this month, speaking at the Economic Club of Chicago, Trump again [refused](#) to commit to a peaceful transfer of power. He has suggest deploying the National Guard and active-duty military against his political opponents, whom he has labelled as “enemies from within.” He says he plans to prosecute his political opponents – NPR [has tracked](#) more than 100 threats by Trump since 2022 to investigate, prosecute, imprison or otherwise punish his perceived enemies.¹ Trump also

¹ The list includes among others:

- President Obama
- President Biden and his family
- Vice President Harris
- Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi
- Former Rep. Liz Cheney
- Rep. Adam Schiff
- Secretary Hillary Clinton
- Former Deputy Director of the FBI Andrew McCabe
- A range of officials involved in the Russia investigation
- General Mark Milley
- Members of the January 6th Committee
- The FBI
- Michael Cohen
- Journalists who decline to identify sources of leaked information
- Poll workers
- Prosecutors, judges and courtroom staff connected to the prosecutions against him
- Members of the US Capitol Police who defended the Capitol on January 6th
- Protesters who burn the American flag
- People who criticize the Supreme Court.
- Democratic district attorneys

Trump called on the Federal Communications Commission to revoke ABC’s broadcast license due to his perception of moderator bias and called for an investigation of CBS News for airing the “60 Minutes” interview with the Vice President.



[plans](#) to launch the largest deportation operation in history, again using the National Guard or the military and setting up a network of detention camps.

Is the reluctance of business leaders to speak out due to a failure to appreciate the risk to their companies, or to the financial markets, or the rule of law, or is it fear? Is it a reliance on the “self-correcting power of electoral competition” – that somehow good ideas and candidates will beat out the bad ones, described by Harvard professors of government Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in their guest essay this past week (“[There Are Four Anti-Trump Pathways We Failed to Take. There Is a Fifth.](#)”)? That reliance, however, is misplaced, they note, due to the distortions caused by the Electoral College and the historical record that candidates seeking to undermine democracy do not always lose. Is it, as I set out in an [essay](#) on the first anniversary of the January 6th insurrection, that American exceptionalism can blind many to domestic political dangers the myriad causes for alarm notwithstanding, with the delusion being driven by the sense that bad things happen elsewhere – not in the United States of America? Is it a sense that they can control his more dangerous impulses?

I could understand why some would be sceptical of Trump’s intentions if this were 2016 and Trump had no track record of wishing to act on authoritarian impulses. But we have two examples to remind us of what lies ahead if he wins – January 6, 2021 and June 1, 2020, and we have the equivalent of eye-witness testimony from those closest to Trump to fill in the gaps.

We Have Been Warned

We all broadly know the events at the Capitol on January 6th and we should all know many of the details of the underlying plans to overturn the election. We may know, but many may choose not to think about, how close we came to those plans coming to fruition. No one should be under any illusion that the outcome early in the morning of January 7th was a foregone conclusion. Had any one of a few things happened or not happened, Trump would have again taken the oath of office on January 20, 2021 (without legal or other consequence).

There should be one other set of data points that sceptics should consider: on June 1, 2020, law enforcement forcibly [cleared](#) protesters from Lafayette Square, using tear gas, stun grenades, smoke bombs, horse-mounted officers, and shields and batons to push peaceful protesters out of the square. The operation was simply to enable Trump to have a photo-op on the far side of the square from the White House in front of St John’s Episcopal Church, and thereby counter conservative commentator criticism that he was weak. There was more though: it was widely [reported](#) that an estimated 700 members of the 82nd Airborne Division were deployed to military bases near the District Capitol Area, and some reported on confirmations by then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley that certain troops were issued bayonets. In addition, in a show-of-force deployment typically intended to intimidate opposing forces, an Army National Guard medevac helicopter hovered low over protesters.

The use of active-duty military was prohibited under the Posse Comitatus Act, which would have required the override available to Trump were he to have invoked the Insurrection Act. (See my January 2024 [briefing note.](#)) Also, as widely [reported](#), during a conference call earlier in the day with state governors, Trump had urged the governors to get tough, and



threatened to deploy federalized National Guard and active duty military against the wishes of state and city officials. For the District of Columbia, Trump was clear. “I am dispatching thousands and thousands of heavily armed soldiers, military personnel and law enforcement officers to stop the rioting, looting, vandalism, assaults and wanton destruction of property. We are putting everybody on warning.”

All to say, we have been warned by events.

Moreover, a number of high-profile officials who worked with Trump, and will no longer be in a position to prevent Trump from acting on his worst impulses were he again to be in the White House, share the view that Trump poses an existential threat to democracy. Bear in mind that for both military officers and intelligence officers who have spent their entire professional lives guided by principles of non-partisanship (that is, staying out of politics), speaking out does not come naturally, and takes immense courage.

- Former Defense Secretary Mark Esper has [said](#) that Trump “is a threat to democracy.”
- General Milley has [said](#) of Trump “he is the most dangerous person ever ... I now realize he is a total fascist.” He is “fascist to the core.” Milley and Esper pushed back against Trump when he repeatedly urged that Black Lives Matter protesters be shot.
- Former DHS Secretary and White House Chief of Staff General John Kelly, who, after setting out the textbook definition of fascism,² [says](#) Trump meets the definition of a fascist, would govern like a dictator and has no concept of the Constitution or the rule of law. Kelly, in interviews with the New York Times and The Atlantic, reported that Trump had told him multiple times that he thought Hitler “had done some good things.” Kelly has warned that Trump “could tell people to do things and they would do it, and not really bother too much about whether, what the legalities were.”³
- Former National Security Adviser General H.R. McMaster [offered](#) a blistering account of his days in the White House
- Former Vice President Mike Pence [said](#) he could not endorse Trump, citing “profound differences” and accusing him of “walking away from the Constitution.”
- Former National Security Adviser John Bolton has [said](#) that Trump “is not fit to be president.” “Trump really cares only about retribution for himself, and it will consume much of a second term.”

² In Kelly’s words, “It’s a far-right authoritarian, ultranationalist political ideology and movement characterized by a dictatorial leader, centralized autocracy, militarism, forcible suppression of opposition, belief in a natural social hierarchy.”

³ The day after General Kelly’s remarks were reported, 13 former officials in the Trump administration released a [letter](#) urging the public to heed the warnings. Among other things, these lifelong Republicans tie Trump’s disdain for the American military and his admiration for dictators to a “desire for absolute, unchecked power.”



- Former White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney [said](#) during the Republican primaries that he was “working hard to make sure that someone else is the [Republican] nominee.”
- Former Homeland Security and Counter-Terrorism Adviser to Vice President Pence Olivia Troye [reminds](#) all who will listen that the “guardrails will be gone.” She says that she “has a tough time understanding why people still think that the norms that we are used to about Congress, Justice, the Supreme Court, the executive branch – why they think Trump will abide by any of that because he’s shown his complete disregard for government institutions. It was the guardrails that were there the first time around that kept them in check.” When saying he wants “Hitler-like generals,” “he wants blind loyalty from the military” to him, not to the Constitution. Troye also [reported](#) that Trump politicized disaster relief.
- A former White House counsel who defended Trump in the Russia interference probe, Ty Cobb, [said](#) of Trump “He has never cared about America, its citizens, its future or anything but himself. In fact, as history well shows from his divisive lies, as well as from his unrestrained contempt for the rule of law and his related crimes, his conduct and mere existence have hastened the demise of democracy and of the nation.”
- Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen [wrote](#) in June 2020 that the use of National Guard at Lafayette Square “sickened” him. Trump “laid bare his disdain for the rights of peaceful protest in this country, gave succor to the leaders of other countries who take comfort in our domestic strife, and risked further politicizing the men and women of our armed forces.” Former Supreme Allied Commander at NATO Admiral James Stavridis, also [writing](#) in June 2020, said that the use of force at Lafayette Square “was beyond the pale of American norms.”

It should go without saying, as Philip Bump [noted](#) this past week, that the comparisons between Trump and Hitler are not the product of left-wing paranoia (or, as his campaign frequently labels liberals’ concerns, “Trump derangement syndrome”), but rather flow directly from Trump’s own words, as relayed by those around him. Bump also notes that one of the first to compare Trump to Hitler was JD Vance.

And What About the Economy?

In their July op-ed in the New York Times (“[The Enormous Risks a Second Trump Term Poses to Our Economy](#)”), Rubin and Chenault, in making the case that Trump poses significant risks to the American economy, recited a now familiar litany of items on Trump’s planned agenda should he win:

- Trump’s tax and spending agenda during his first term added an estimated \$7.8 trillion to the national debt (citing a 2022 [report](#) by Brian Riedl of the Manhattan Institute).
- Trump’s extension of the individual and estate tax provisions of his 2017 tax cuts that otherwise expire at the end of 2025 would add a further \$3.9 trillion to the national debt (\$4.5 trillion with interest) through FY 2035 and extending nearly all expired, expiring and changing tax provisions would add \$5.2 trillion (\$6.1 trillion with interest) to the national debt (citing a June 2024 [report](#) from the Committee for a



Responsible Federal Budget). By 2035, this would increase the national debt by 10.5% of GDP, with annual revenue loss approaching \$500 billion per year.

- Trump’s intention of reducing legal immigration would deprive the economy of much needed workers at all skill levels. Moreover, ordering the military or federalized National Guard to [deport](#) 10.5 million undocumented migrants would likely lead to widespread disruption of supply chains as well as significant social instability. Immigrants fill necessary jobs and are consumers.
- Trump’s [threat](#) to raise tariffs across the board would increase prices for American manufacturers that depend on foreign suppliers and for consumers, and would likely lead other countries to impose their own tariffs against American exports.
- Trump has threatened to use the regulatory powers of the federal government to punish perceived political opponents and reward loyalists.
- Trump has threatened to reduce the independence of the Federal Reserve, politicizing decisions on interest rates and reducing the credibility of the Federal Reserve.
- Trump’s has [threatened](#) to remove up to 50,000 civil servants and replace them with political loyalists. These federal government employees perform a range of functions that are critical to the functioning of the economy.

The New York Times Editorial Board earlier this month ([“American Business Cannot Afford to Risk Another Trump Presidency”](#)) cited another troubling threat to business and the integrity of the American markets – efforts to undermine what Roberto Stefan Foa and Rachel Kleinfeld [called](#) the “operating environment capitalism depends on.” The Board noted that Trump has called into question the integrity of federal data and government experts. In August, Trump [claimed](#), without evidence, that a routine annual revision in employment data issued by the Bureau of Labor Statistics was manipulated to favor the Harris campaign. This prompted Micheal Strain, an economist at the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute, to characterize the allegation “as grossly irresponsible and completely inaccurate.”

Business Leaders Have a Stake in (and a Voice in Support of) Democracy

Business leaders have for generations been safe in assuming that regardless of the party in power, the drivers of the American economy and the predicate for long-term planning and capital investment – respect for the rule of law, for property rights and for independence of the courts – would not be called into question, let alone actively undermined. But, Trump has [threatened](#) to upend 50 years of policies and practices put in place following Watergate to shield criminal prosecutions from political interference and to use the Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation to pursue his political opponents, undermining the bedrock of a vibrant economy, the rule of law. It is hardly a stretch to imagine what happens next – high profile leaders will be forced to take sides. Those compelled to support the rule of law could find themselves targets.

Incidentally, to insist that keeping quiet is an imperative to avoid potentially negative consequences that may well flow from speaking out makes the case for speaking out now. What better example of the fate that awaits us all if Trump wins – a president willing to



weaponize all the considerable tools at his disposal to wreak revenge on all who stand in his way.

Levitsky and Ziblatt remind us that “Democracy’s last bastion of defense is civil society” and that it is incumbent on those with credible voices – be they business leaders, religious leaders, labor leaders or others – to speak out and remind citizens of “the red lines that democratic societies must never cross.” If the red lines are in danger of being crossed, that is when the trusted voices must repudiate those who have crossed the lines.

They cite the public [revulsion](#) that sparked the largest post-war demonstrations in Germany in reaction to an [report](#) from an investigative news outlet that, at a meeting in November 2023, leaders of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) had discussed with neo-Nazi leaders (including from the Identitarian movement) and sympathetic businesspeople a plan for the forced deportation of immigrants from Germany (what they termed re-migration), including foreign-born Germans. Business leaders joined labor leaders to condemn the meeting and [express support](#) for liberal democracy and the values enshrined in the Basic Law (the country’s equivalent of our Constitution).

Levitsky and Ziblatt also cite the example of business, religious and civil society leaders mobilizing in the run up to the 2022 elections in Brazil in response to threats against the Supreme Court and attacks against the legitimacy of elections instigated by then President Bolsonaro. The response included [letters](#) from businesspeople, among then leaders of many of the largest banks and businesses). A third [example](#) would be the mobilization in Israel in May 2023 (including business leaders and those operating in the tech space) protesting against the plans of the right-wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu to severely weaken the country’s Supreme Court and weaken judicial oversight of legislative and executive decisions.

Concluding Thoughts

Former Federal Judge J. Michael Luttig, speaking this evening, [reminds](#) us that our democracy and the rule of law are the constitutional pillars, the cornerstones of our constitutional republic. Our democracy and rule of law have made America the envy of the world. Trump has corrupted America’s democracy and rule of law. Shunning Trump should not be a partisan issue – this is about putting country before party and ourselves. If Republicans are not prepared to do so now, they will never be able to. His endorsement and vote for the Vice President, he said, is in no way a reflection of her policy views (in fact, he says he is indifferent to those), but rather is a reflection solely of her position on democracy, the Constitution and rule of law, in stark contrast to Trump’s. The question should not be whether the Vice President is fit to serve as president, she is. The question is whether Trump is fit to serve, and he is not.

Timothy Snyder, prompted by the decisions of The Los Angeles Times and the Washington Post to not endorse a presidential candidate, [warned today](#) of the risks of what he terms “obeying in advance.” Twentieth century history tells us that Hitler’s rise to power was greatly facilitated by people anticipating what Hitler would want and going halfway. Acting on the basis of what one assumes an authoritarian will want when the authoritarian comes to power only makes it more likely that that the authoritarian will come to power. In making



concessions ahead of time, people are preparing themselves for making further concessions when the authoritarian comes to power.

Taking these two themes together, my hope is that business leaders will put country over party and over self, speak out in support of democracy and vote for Kamala Harris.

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