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GUEST ESSAY

'You Don't Negotiate With These Kinds of People'

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Over the past eight years, the Republican Party has been transformed from a generally staid institution representing the allure of low taxes, conservative social cultural policies and laissez-faire capitalism into a party of blatant chaos and disruption.

The shift has been evident in many ways — at the presidential level, as the party nominated Donald Trump not once but twice and has been offered the chance to do so a third time; in Trump's — and Trump's allies' — attempt to overturn the 2020 election results; in his spearheading of the Jan. 6 assault on the Capitol; and most recently in the brutal series of votes from Jan. 3 to Jan. 7 in the House of Representatives, where 20 hard-right members held Kevin McCarthy hostage until he cried uncle and was finally elected speaker.

What drives the members of the Freedom Caucus, who have wielded the threat of dysfunction to gain a level of control within the House far in excess of their numbers? How has this group moved from the margins to the center of power in less than a decade?

Since its founding in 2015, this cadre has acquired a well-earned reputation for using high-risk tactics to bring down two House speakers, John Boehner and Paul Ryan. During the five-day struggle over McCarthy's potential speakership, similar pressure tactics wrested crucial agenda-setting authority from the Republican leadership in the House.

"You don't negotiate with these kinds of people," Representative Mike Rogers, Republican of Alabama and chairman of the Armed Services Committee, declared as the saga unfolded. "These are legislative terrorists."

"We have grifters in our midst," Representative Dan Crenshaw, Republican of Texas, told the Texas Liberty Alliance PAC.

One of the key factors underlying the extremism among Republicans in the House and their election denialism — which has confounded American politics since it erupted in 2020 — is racial tension, not always explicit but nonetheless omnipresent, captured in part by the growing belief that white Americans will soon be in the minority.

As Jack Balkin of Yale Law School noted, "The defenders of the old order have every incentive to resist the emergence of a new regime until the bitter end."

In his paper "Public Opinion Roots of Election Denialism," published on Jan. 6, the second anniversary of the storming of the Capitol, Charles Stewart III, a political scientist at M.I.T., argues that "among Republicans, conspiracism has a potent effect on embracing election denialism, followed by racial resentment."

According to Stewart's calculations, "a Republican at the 10th percentile of the conspiracism scale has a 55.7 percent probability of embracing election denialism, compared to a Republican at the 90th percentile, at 86.6 percent, over 30 points higher. A Republican at the 10th percentile on the racial resentment scale has a 59.4 percent probability of embracing denialism, compared to 83.2 percent for a Republican at the 90th percentile on the same scale."

In other words, the two most powerful factors driving Republicans who continue to believe that Trump actually won the 2020 election are receptivity to conspiracy thinking and racial resentment.

"The most confirmed Republican denialists," Stewart writes, "believe that large malevolent forces are at work in world events, racial minorities are given too much deference in society and America's destiny is a Christian one."

Along parallel lines, Neil Siegel, a law professor at Duke, argues in his 2021 article "The Trump Presidency, Racial Realignment and the Future of Constitutional Norms," that Donald Trump "is more of an effect than a cause of larger racial and cultural changes in American society that are causing Republican voters and politicians to perceive an existential threat to their continued political and cultural power — and, relatedly, to deny the legitimacy of their political opponents."

In this climate, Siegel continues, "It is very unlikely that Republican politicians will respect constitutional norms when they deem so much to be at stake in each election and significant governmental decision."

These developments draw attention to some of the psychological factors driving politics and partisan competition.

In a 2020 paper, "Dark Necessities? Candidates' Aversive Personality Traits and Negative Campaigning in the 2018 American Midterms," Alessandro Nai and Jürgen Maier, political scientists at the University of Amsterdam and the University of Koblenz-Landau in Germany, argue that the role of subclinical "psychopathy" is significant in the behavior of a growing number of elected officials:

> Psychopaths usually show "a cognitive bias towards perceiving hostile intent from others" and are impulsive, prone to callous social attitudes and show a strong proclivity for interpersonal antagonism. Individuals high in psychopathy do not possess the ability to recognize or accept the existence of antisocial behaviors and thus should be expected to more naturally adopt a more confrontational, antagonistic and aggressive style of political competition. Individuals high in psychopathy have been shown to have more successful trajectories in politics. They are furthermore often portrayed as risk-oriented agents. In this sense, we could expect individuals that score high in psychopathy to make a particularly strong use of attacks, regardless of the risk of backlash effects.

Narcissism, Nai and Maier continue,

> has been shown to predict more successful political trajectories, also due to the prevalence of social dominance intrinsic in the trait. Narcissism is, furthermore, linked to overconfidence and deceit and hypercompetitiveness, which could explain why narcissists are more likely to engage in angry/aggressive behaviors and general incivility in their workplace. Narcissism is furthermore linked to reckless behavior and risk-taking and thus individuals high in this trait are expected to disregard the risk of backlash effects.

Nai and Maier also refer to a character trait they consider politically relevant, Machiavellianism, which they describe as having

> an aggressive and malicious side. People high in Machiavellianism are "characterized by cynical and misanthropic beliefs, callousness, a striving for argentic goals (i.e., money, power and status) and the use of calculating and cunning manipulation tactics" and in general tend to display a malevolent behavior intended to "seek control over others."

In an email, Nai argued that structural and ideological shifts have opened the door to "a greater tolerance and preference for political aggressiveness." First, there is the rise of populism, which "strongly relies on a very aggressive stance against established elites, with a more aggressive style and rhetoric."

"Populists," Nai added, "are very peculiar political animals, happy to engage in more aggressive rhetoric to push the boundaries of normality. This helps them getting under the spotlight and explains why they seem to have a much greater visibility (and perhaps power) than they numerically should."

Second, Nai contended that

> a case can be made that contemporary politics is the realm of politicians with a harsh and uncompromising personality (callousness, narcissism and even Machiavellianism). Trump, Bolsonaro, Duterte, all share a rather "nasty" character, which seems indicative of a contemporary preference for uncompromising and aggressive leaders. Such political aggressiveness (populism, negativity, incivility, dark personality) is perfectly in character for a political system characterized with high polarization and extreme dislike for political opponents.

Other scholars emphasize the importance of partisan polarization, anti-elitism and the rise of social media in creating a political environment in which extremists can thrive.

"There are likely a few factors at play here," Jay Van Bavel, a professor of psychology and neural science at N.Y.U., wrote by email. "The first is that ideologically extreme people tend to be more dogmatic — especially people who are on the far right."

He cited a 2021 national survey that he and Elizabeth Harris, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, conducted that "found that conservatism and ideological extremity both contributed to an unwillingness to compromise."

The members of the Freedom Caucus, Van Bavel noted,

> tend to be ideologically extreme conservatives, which makes them very good candidates for this type of rigid and extreme thinking. We also found that politically extreme individuals were more likely to have a sense of belief superiority. These traits help explain why this group is very unwilling to cooperate or strike a political compromise.

Three years ago, I wrote a column for The Times about a segment of the electorate — and a faction of elected officials — driven by "a need for chaos," based on the work of Michael Bang Petersen and Mathias Osmundsen, political scientists at Aarhus University in Denmark, and Kevin Arceneaux, a political scientist at Sciences Po in Paris. Since then, the three, joined by Timothy B. Gravelle, Jason Reifler and Thomas J. Scotto, have updated their work in a 2021 paper, "Some People Just Want to Watch the World Burn: The Prevalence, Psychology and Politics of the 'Need for Chaos.'"

In their new paper, they argue:

> Some people may be motivated to seek out chaos because they want to rebuild society, while others enjoy destruction for its own sake. We demonstrate that chaos seekers are not a unified political group but a divergent set of malcontents. Multiple pathways can lead individuals to "want to watch the world burn."

The distinction between those seeking chaos to fulfill destructive impulses and those seeking chaos in order to rebuild the system is crucial, according to the authors:

> The finding that thwarted status desires drive a need for chaos, which then activates support for political protest and violence, suggests that a need for chaos may be a key driver of societal change, both currently and historically. While some simply want to "watch the world burn," others want to see a new world rebuilt from the ashes.

There are, the authors continue,

> both nihilists and those who have a purpose. Nonetheless, owing to the destructive force of a high need for chaos, one of the key challenges of contemporary societies is indeed to meet, recognize and, to the extent possible, alleviate the frustrations of these individuals. The alternative is a trail of nihilistic destruction.

In a more recent paper, published last year, "The 'Need for Chaos' and Motivations to Share Hostile Political Rumors," Petersen, Osmundsen and Arceneaux found that the need for chaos "is significantly higher among participants who readily take risks to obtain status and among participants who feel lonely." At the extreme, the need surpasses partisanship: "For chaos-seekers, political sympathies toward political parties appear to matter little for sharing decisions; instead, what matters is that rumors can be used as an instrument to mobilize against the entire political establishment."

The authors found that "the need for chaos is most strongly associated with worries about losing one's own position in the social hierarchy and — to a lesser but still significant extent — the perception that one is personally being kept back from climbing the social status ladder," noting that "white men react more aggressively than any other group to perceived status challenges."

Van Bavel wrote by email that instead of focusing on a need for chaos, he believes "it might be simpler to assume that they are simply indifferent to chaos in the service of dogmatism. You see some of this on the far left — but we found that it simply doesn't reach the same extremes as the far right."

Van Bavel pointed to the structural aspects of the contemporary political system that reward the adoption of extreme stances:

> In the immediate political context, where there is extremely high polarization driven by partisan animosity, there are strong social media incentives to take extreme stances and an unwillingness for moderate Republicans to break ranks and strike a compromise with Democrats. In this context, the Freedom Caucus can get away with dogmatic behavior without many serious consequences. Indeed, it might even benefit their national profile, election prospects and fund-raising success.

Along similar lines, Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at N.Y.U., stressed

> the rapid change in audience and incentives that social media has engineered for congresspeople. The case of Ted Cruz, caught checking his mentions as he sat down from giving a speech on the Senate floor, is illustrative. Why is he making himself so responsive to strangers on Twitter, rather than to his constituents or to his colleagues in the Senate?

Haidt wrote by email that he agrees with Yuval Levin, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, that:

> Social media has contributed to the conversion of our major institutions from formative (they shape character) to performative (they are platforms on which influencers can perform to please and grow their audiences). When we add in the "primary problem" — that few congressional races are competitive, so all that matters is the primary, which gives outsized influence to politically extreme voters — we have both a road into Congress for social media influencers and the ultimate platform for their performances.

Plus, Haidt added:

> The influence economy may give them financial and career independence; once they are famous, they don't need to please their party's leadership. They'll have opportunities for money and further influence even if they leave Congress.

Leanne ten Brinke, a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, wrote by email:

> My research on power and politics focuses on the role of psychopathic personality traits, which is characterized by callousness, manipulation/coercion, impulsivity and a desire for dominance. When people think of psychopathy they often think of criminals or serial killers, but these traits exist on a continuum, so people can be "high" in these traits without meeting any kind of clinical cutoff, and it will impact the way they move through the world. People with high levels of these traits tend to gravitate toward powerful roles in society to fulfill that desire for dominance and to bully others when in these roles.

Brinke noted that she has "no data on the personalities of those in the House Freedom Caucus," but in "previous research we actually found that U.S. senators who display behaviors consistent with psychopathy were more likely to get elected (they are great competitors!) but are less likely to garner co-sponsors on their bills (they are terrible cooperators!)." In addition, Brinke continued, "they enjoy having power over others but don't use it to make legislative progress. They tend to be more self-interested than other-interested."

In a separate 2020 paper, "Light and Dark Trait Subtypes of Human Personality," by Craig S. Neumann, Scott Barry Kaufman, David Bryce Yaden, Elizabeth Hyde, Eli Tsukayama and Brinke, the authors find:

> The light subtype evidenced affiliative interpersonal functioning and greater trust in others, as well as higher life satisfaction and positive self-image. The dark subtype reflected interpersonal dominance, competitiveness and aggression. In both general population samples, the dark trait subtype was the least prevalent. However, in a third sample of U.S. senators (N =143), based on observational data, the dark subtype was most prevalent and associated with longer tenure in political office, though less legislative success.

In a separate 2019 paper, "The Light vs. Dark Triad of Personality: Contrasting Two Very Different Profiles of Human Nature," Kaufman, Yaden, Hyde and Tsukayama wrote that dark personalities are "not associated with exclusively adverse and transgressive psychosocial outcomes" and may, instead, "be considered adaptive."

Those with the more forbidding personal characteristics "showed positive correlations with a variety of variables that could facilitate one's more agentic-related goals" and they "positively correlated with utilitarian moral judgment and creativity, bravery and leadership, as well as assertiveness, in addition to motives for power, achievement and self-enhancement."

In contrast, more sunny and cooperative dispositions were "correlated with greater 'reaction formation,' which consisted of the following items: 'If someone mugged me and stole my money, I'd rather he be helped than punished' and 'I often find myself being very nice to people who by all rights I should be angry at.' While having such 'loving kindness' even for one's enemies is conducive to one's own well-being, these attitudes" could potentially make these people "more open to exploitation and emotional manipulation."

In March 2022, Richard Pildes, a law professor at N.Y.U., warned in "Political Fragmentation in Democracies of the West":

> The decline of effective government throughout most Western democracies poses one of the greatest challenges democracy currently confronts. The importance of effective government receives too little attention in democratic and legal theory, yet the inability to deliver effective government can lead citizens to alienation, distrust and withdrawal from participation and, worse, to endorse authoritarian leaders who promise to cut through the dysfunctions of democratic governments.

For the Republican Party, the empowerment of the Freedom Caucus will face its first major test of viability this month. According to Janet Yellen, secretary of the Treasury, the United States will hit the $31.4 trillion statutory debt limit on Jan. 19. The Treasury, she continued, would then be forced to adopt stringent cash-management procedures that could put off default until June.

At the moment, House Republicans, under pressure from the Freedom Caucus, are demanding that legislation raising the debt ceiling be accompanied by sharp spending cuts. That puts them at loggerheads with the Biden administration and many members of the Senate Democratic majority, raising the possibility of a government shutdown.

In other words, the takeover of the Republican Party by politicians either participating in or acceding to tribalism and chaos has the clear potential in coming weeks to put the entire nation at risk.

Looking past the debt ceiling to the 2024 elections, Richard L. Hasen, a law professor at U.C.L.A., writes in the April 2022 Harvard Law Review:

> The United States faces a serious risk that the 2024 presidential election, and other future U.S. elections, will not be conducted fairly and that the candidates taking office will not reflect the free choices made by eligible voters under previously announced election rules. The potential mechanisms by which election losers may be declared election winners are: (1) usurpation of voter choices for president by state legislatures purporting to exercise constitutional authority, possibly with the blessing of a partisan Supreme Court and the acquiescence of Republicans in Congress; (2) fraudulent or suppressive election administration or vote counting by law- or norm-breaking election officials; and (3) violent or disruptive private action that prevents voting, interferes with the counting of votes or interrupts the assumption of power by the actual winning candidate.

What, one has to ask, does this constant brinkmanship and playing to the gallery do to democracy generally?

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