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# What Democrats Need to Do Now

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In 2016, MAGA was just a slogan — or at best a spasm of resentments and instincts about issues like immigration. Over the last eight years, think tankers, activists and politicians have developed MAGA into a worldview, a worldview that now transcends Donald Trump.

Across the Western world, right-wing parties have ceased to be parties of the business elites and have become working-class parties. MAGA is the worldview that accords with this shifting reality. It has its roots in Andrew Jackson-style populism, but it is updated and more comprehensive. It is the worldview that represents one version of working-class interests and offers working-class voters respect.

JD Vance is the embodiment and one of the developers of this worldview — with his suspicion of corporate power, foreign entanglements, free trade, cultural elites and high rates of immigration. In Milwaukee this week, with Vance as Trump's pick for vice president, it became clear how thoroughly MAGA has replaced Reaganism as the chief operating system of the Republican Party.

If Democrats want to beat MAGA, it's not enough to say: Orange man bad. Talking endlessly about Jan. 6 does no good. If Democrats hope to win in the near future they have to take the MAGA worldview seriously, and respectfully make the case, especially to working-class voters, for something better.

At its best, what is MAGA, anyway?

Well, in any society, there is a legitimate tension between security and dynamism. In a volatile world, MAGA offers people security. It promises secure borders and secure neighborhoods. It offers protection from globalization, from the creative destruction of modern capitalism. It offers protection from an educated class that looks down on you and indoctrinates your children in school. It offers you protection from corporate predators. As Senator Josh Hawley argued in *Compact* magazine this week, "The C-suite long ago sold out the United States, shuttering factories in the homeland and gutting American jobs."

To those who rightly feel buffeted by vast and destabilizing forces, Trump emerges as a kind of Aaron Sorkin character: “You want me on that wall. You need me on that wall.” He offers security so people can get on with their lives.

Now, the problem with MAGA — and here is where the Democratic opportunity lies — is that it emerges from a mode of consciousness that is very different from the traditional American consciousness.

The American consciousness has traditionally been an abundance consciousness. Successive waves of immigrants found a vast continent of fertile fields and bustling cities. In 1910, Henry van Dyke, who later became the U.S. ambassador to the Netherlands and Luxembourg, wrote a book called “The Spirit of America,” in which he observed that “the Spirit of America is best known in Europe by one of its qualities — energy.” In the 20th century, Luigi Barzini, an Italian observer, argued that Americans have a zeal for continual self-improvement, a “need tirelessly to tinker, improve everything and everybody, never leave anything alone.”

Many foreign observers saw us, and we saw ourselves, as the dynamic nation par excellence. We didn’t have a common past, but we dreamed of a common future. Our sense of home was not rooted in blood-and-soil nationalism; our home was something we were building together. Through most of our history, we were not known for our profundity or culture but for living at full throttle.

MAGA, on the other hand, emerges from a scarcity consciousness, a zero-sum mentality: If we let in tons of immigrants they will take all of *our* jobs; if America gets browner, “they” will replace “us.” MAGA is based on a series of victim stories: The elites are out to screw us. Our allies are freeloading off us. Secular America is oppressing Christian America.



## A Timeline of Lies, Chaos and Damage: This Is Trump's Record as President

Viewed from the traditional American abundance mind-set, MAGA looks less like an American brand of conservatism and more like a European brand of conservatism. It resembles all

those generations of Russian chauvinists who argued that the Russian masses embody all that is good but they are threatened by aliens from the outside. MAGA looks like a kind of right-wing Marxism, which assumes that class struggle is the permanent defining feature of politics. MAGA is a fortress mentality, but America has traditionally been defined by a pioneering mentality. MAGA offers a strong shell, but not much in the way of wings needed to soar.

If Democrats are to thrive, they need to tap into America's dynamic cultural roots and show how they can be applied to the 21st century. It should be said that social dynamism is more complicated than it appears at first blush. It's not just getting on your Harley and hitting the open road. It's not really about rugged individualism or the libertarian version of freedom as the absence of constraint.

My favorite definition of dynamism is adapted from the psychologist John Bowlby: All of life is a series of daring explorations from a secure base. If Democrats are to thrive, they need to offer people a vision both of the secure base and of the daring explorations.

Here's where they have a potentially good story to tell. Americans can't be secure if the world is in flames. That's why America has to be active abroad in places like Ukraine, keeping wolves like Vladimir Putin at bay. Americans can't be secure if the border is in

chaos. Popular support for continued immigration depends on a sense that the government has things under control. Americans can't be secure if a single setback will send people to the depths of crushing poverty. That's why the social insurance programs that Democrats largely built are so important.

But what Democrats really need to do, in my view, is to offer people a vision of the daring explorations that await them. That's where the pessimistic post-Reagan Republicans can't compete. American dynamism was turbocharged by the construction of the transcontinental railway, the creation of the land grant colleges, the G.I. Bill and President Biden's successful efforts to revive our industrial base in the American Midwest.

Personally, I wish Democrats would spend less time on dumb, reactionary policies like rent control. That reeks of panic in the Biden campaign. I wish they would champion the abundance agenda that people like Derek Thompson and my colleague Ezra Klein have been writing about. We need to build things. Lots of new homes. Supersonic airplanes and high-speed trains.

Democrats need to take on their teachers' unions and commit to dynamism in the field of education. They need to stand up to protectionism, not join the stampede. Raising tariffs, as Trump wants to do, would not only raise costs on American consumers; it would also breed laziness and mediocrity within those sectors

cosseted from competition. Democrats need to throttle back the regulators who have been given such free rein that they've stifled innovation.

If Republicans are going to double down on class war rhetoric — elites versus masses — Democrats need to get out of that business. They need to tap back into the more traditional American aspiration: We are not sentenced to a permanent class-riven future but can create a fluid, mobile society.

The economist Michael Strain of the American Enterprise Institute has offered a telling psychic critique of MAGA economic thinking: “The economics of grievance is ineffective, counterproductive and corrosive, eroding the foundations of prosperity. Messages matter. Tell people that the system is rigged, and they will aspire to less. Champion personal responsibility, and they will lift their aspirations. Promoting an optimistic vision of economic life can increase risk tolerance, ambition, effort and dynamism.”

Strain is getting at the core point that aspiration is not like a brick that just sits there. Aspiration is more like a flame that can be fed or dampened. The venture capitalist Marc Andreessen underlined the point a few years ago: “The problem is desire. We need to *\*want\** these things. The problem is inertia. We need to want these things more than we want to prevent these things.”

In Milwaukee, I have heard a lot of patriotism, but it was the patriotism of nostalgia, not the patriotism of hope. That leaves an opening for the folks who gather in Chicago next month.

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