

What "Make America Great Again" Really Means

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Donald Trump's wholly unprecedented political disruption and victory is still working itself out and will surely reverberate in the public's consciousness for years to come. It also added a new phrase to our national political vocabulary: "Make America Great Again."

The press, the Left, and the anti-Trump faction of the conservative Right want to say that the phrase is nothing more than a racist dog whistle or a wink-and-a-nod to a time when women and minorities knew their place in patriarchal, white Christian America. But these are tired shibboleths and represent failures to take Trump and his supporters seriously. Even if critics ultimately dismiss the Trumpian understanding of "Make America Great Again," it is wrong to fail to grapple with it on its own terms.

We can discern what Trump and his supporters truly mean by "MAGA" by examining various other statements spoken by Trump and others both on the campaign trail and post-election and by honestly assessing those statements: "drain the swamp," "deconstruction of the administrative state," and, "What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people."

But Trump appeared to have understood instinctively, at a gut level, the critical need to restore the nation to that previous mode of being by sounding the alarm about the pernicious administrative state; that resonated powerfully with voters who felt their identity and heritage were under siege from the forces of globalization, "free" trade, and a virtually unsecured southern border and that warmed over Reaganism wouldn't—couldn't—be the answer they needed.

It's clear from these declarations that Trump and his administration's primary concern is for the sovereignty of the American people, for their ability to chart their own political destiny unencumbered by liberty-destroying fixtures like the administrative state. To assert that this slogan is anything other than a simple, powerful, and resoundingly American idea is to expose oneself as engaged in motivated reasoning and sloppy thinking: finding bigoted bogeymen where there is only a desire to hearken and gesture back to America's founding origins—to recover them in practice. "Make America Great Again" points to the past in saying "again," sure, but it is fundamentally an expression of a healthy nostalgia—not to a more racist time or to an era where workers were mistreated—for a time when the American people, for all their faults, were still steeped in a tradition of liberty and understood at a deep level the rights they had and the duties these rights imposed upon them for the maintenance of self-government.

Some are alarmed by this "psychological disposition" and dismiss it as unrealistic or unworkable in the real world. They call it "reactionism," and the clear implication is that people's urge to want to go back, to want to do anything at all except race headlong, blinders fully engaged, forward—never mind where, just *forward!*—is fundamentally mistaken: perhaps even fatally bigoted. But when such a one way ratchet has crystallized itself into the "conventional wisdom" of D.C.'s "bipartisan junta" it is certainly time to heed the advice of C.S. Lewis and recognize that the fastest way to return to the right path after realizing that one is on the wrong path is to *turn around*.

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To achieve this goal—making America great again—we will have to rethink the status quo at home of a government-by-experts that "dispassionately" and "neutrally" "implements scientific policy in the public interest" and the relationship between the nation-state and entangling military treaties (e.g., NATO), labyrinthine "free trade" agreements (e.g., NAFTA), and transnational, technocratic institutions (e.g., the United Nations) abroad. In both domestic and foreign affairs, the primacy of the will of the people—acting through their elected representatives—at home and as a sovereign and independent state abroad (not an unrooted, philosophical construct) must be unabashedly reasserted.

Writing in *National Affairs*, Greg Weiner, an assistant professor of political science at Assumption College, notes that constitutional law scholars, especially those partial to originalism, "almost universally agree that the New Deal derailed the regime the framers designed in Philadelphia in 1787." Further, "The eruption of legislative activity in Roosevelt's first 100 days in office ... is widely assumed to form a partition separating a long period of limited national government from one of concentrated central authority." This heretofore unseen rift in the constitutional order, with its roots

in Wilsonian progressivism, is what gave rise to the unofficial fourth branch of the U.S. government. Not the media (thank God!) but something much more pernicious: the administrative state. This illegitimate fourth branch was birthed by "some favorable emergency"—the Great Depression—and exploited by FDR, a power-hungry opportunist. (Fact: His administration's Keynesian economic interventions served only to prolong the worst economic downturn in the country's history.)

The administrative state has "subverted, perhaps irreversibly" our constitutional order by flouting with impunity the indispensable principle of the separation of powers, subsuming for itself all three species of State power: the legislative, the executive, and the judicial. The *Federal Register*, a daily digest published by the federal government since 1936 that contains proposed regulations from agencies, finalized rules, notices, and corrections, has grown by more than 60,000 pages *every single year for the last 20 years* (stacking *only* the pages added since 1993, it exceeds the 555-foot-tall Washington Monument). If you honestly think you haven't violated at least one of those rules at some point, or that you're truly free while that monstrosity exists, then you're not being honest with yourself. (I'll bet you didn't know you commit about three felonies per day!)

Obviously, the president, Congress, and the Supreme Court could work, whether independently or in concert, to wrest authority from the administrative state and restore themselves to their rightful constitutionally-sourced roles, but they have shown depressingly little initiative on that front. And the fourth branch is also essentially unaccountable to democratic management. It has its own internal, self-directed momentum and refuses to be repurposed, redirected, slowed, or stopped altogether. So we are consigned, by their dereliction of duty, to suffer under this new and foreign Leviathan.

Why should this trouble us? For two reasons. First, because Madison presciently warned over two centuries ago in *Federalist 51* of the dangers of blurring the sharp distinctions in authority erected by the Constitution between the three branches—which is why he and the other Framers built both the separation of powers and checks and balances directly into the Constitution's architecture. Indeed, Madison in no uncertain terms stated in *Federalist 47* what the outcome of undermining that architecture would be: "The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, selfappointed [*sic*], or elective, may justly be pronounced *the very definition of tyranny*" (emphasis added).

This perfectly describes the Administrative State: an illegitimate conglomerate of all three species of State power, one which invades our lives with frightening effectiveness because it has no incentive to vie for power over and against the other three, legitimate branches.

The second reason we ought to be concerned is that *we are no longer living under our original government*. Whatever philosophical consent means, it certainly does not require the American people to agree to be ruled by a State that is in some fundamental sense not the one established by the original, founding charter: the Constitution. A bloodless coup has been carried out, and it seems we are all none the wiser. Largely through the Supreme Court's passivity and inclination toward technocracy (but a Caesarist, expansionist presidency and a feckless Congress no doubt shoulder their share of the blame), the constitutional order established in 1787 has been turned on its head. As Timothy Sandefur of the Goldwater Institute astutely notes, we now live in a society where our freedoms are treated as privileges that the government can grant or restrict at will (as

they were pre-Enlightenment), not as inborn rights that the government must have very good reasons to violate. We increasingly are content to pursue our various projects within the confines of cramped "freedom zones" whose contours are set by the State in its "beneficence."

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Thus, in a practical sense, we no longer conceive of ourselves (and certainly the government does not view us) as born *basically* free. As evidence of this, look no further than the truly disturbing lengths to which Uncle Sam will go to *shut down children's lemonade stands*. No longer is government limited, which is a shame. Were it so, each of the two major political "tribes" would not view lost presidential elections as signs of an imminent Apocalypse and lose their minds—as the Democratic Party and liberal activists *still* are even as Trump's "first 100 days" are now behind us—because it would not matter so much who, in particular, was in power. Government would simply be far too feeble to actually direct, control, and/or micromanage the substantive content of our lives.

Trump's presidency so far has achieved quite a lot of good—especially when weighed against the possibility of at least four more years of Obama-Clinton style progressivism. He managed to get a stalwart originalist—Justice Gorsuch—confirmed to the Court, cracked down on the flow of illegal immigrants through the southern border, and took a swing at excessive regulations. The House improved upon ObamaCare by passing its version of the AHCA (the Senate will do yet more). And tax reform is up next.

In truth, Trump could be restricted to a single, disastrously unproductive (and even thoroughly scandal-ridden) term, and America would still ultimately come out the winner (particularly if he were able to nominate one—or even two—more Supreme Court justices).

Why?

Because his election has precipitated a fundamental realignment of our nation's politics; it has opened a political Pandora's Box. No longer will it be possible for candidates to ignore core issues, issues integral to national self-determination, such as immigration and proper foreign engagement—at least not if they actually want to win. Trump has given Americans a great gift by offering us a chance to claim once more our multi-faceted birthright as Americans: a government constrained by the rule of law, our God-given right to liberty, the Constitution's structural commitment to federalism, and our own rightful claim to be a sovereign people. We have been given an opportunity—We the People have—to try to see to it that the "Blessings of Liberty" are secured "to ourselves and our Posterity."

Let us not waste the opportunity.