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Afterword

Seduced and Abandoned

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How did it happen? Alarms were sounded. Kamala Harris warned Americans that Trump was preoccupied with enriching himself, and intent on flouting the Constitution and abusing his power as a dictator. She wasn't wrong, and she wasn't alone. Generals Mark Milley and John Kelly, both of whom served under Trump, similarly warned that Trump was unworthy of the office and a threat to the nation. So, how did a second Trump presidency happen? That is the question these commentaries examine, one that will occupy scholars around the world for decades. For me, a related question lingers. How is it that citizens, including members of marginalized groups, handed over their power and self-determining freedom to an oppressive government, led by those who give ample evidence that they lack any regard for the rights and well-being of anyone but the wealthiest Americans? Although demography is not destiny, the 2024 election begs the question of why vast numbers of voters were unable to see themselves and their communities as vulnerable to likely harm from a second Trump administration and GOP policies.

In an impassioned speech in Michigan at a rally in support of Kamala Harris's campaign, Michelle Obama addressed the potential threat of a Trump presidency to abortion access for all women, and to women's access to lifesaving health care. Asking men to consider the potential harm to the lives of women in their families, she implored, "[p]lease, please, do not hand our fates over to the likes of Trump, who knows nothing about us, who has shown deep contempt for us, because a vote for him is a vote against us, against ourselves, against our worth. To think that the men we love can be either unaware or indifferent to our plight is simply heartbreaking." Obama added, this time speaking to women: "we have every right to demand that the men in our lives do better by us to make those choices clear to the men that we love our lives are worth more than their anger and disappointment. We are more than baby-making vessels."[1] As Obama spoke, women were at death's door or dying from the denial of life saving health care imposed by state abortion bans. Harris's defeat meant that many women and men Michelle Obama hoped to reach did not hear, could not imagine

themselves in such peril, or were unmoved by her message. Sadly, we cannot doubt that among those who heard Obama's appeal there were men—and women—who shared the contempt for black and brown women's lives, and all women's lives, of which Michelle Obama spoke.

But the present targets of dehumanization and persecution are the immigrants in our midst, mainly from Mexico and Central America. Which is striking, given that Latino Americans (nearly 20 percent of the US population) made the biggest rightward shift from 2020 among demographic groups, in favor of Trump. Biden won Latinos 65–32; Harris won them by only 53–45. Among Latino men, Biden won 59–36; in 2024, Trump won the group outright, 54–44.[2] How might we understand the dramatic shift of Hispanic voters to the right in the 2024 election, despite the fact that mass deportation of so-called illegal immigrants was a top priority in the Republican Party's far-right agenda? And notwithstanding Trump and his supporters' bigoted slurs targeting Hispanics, Puerto Ricans, and Haitians? Many Hispanics, according to one analysis, have assimilated, adopting the majority society's anti-immigration views. This, combined with impatience with the Democratic party's failure to improve their lives, led many to take a chance on the erratic would-be strongman who resembled the type of leaders from their countries of origin, despite his vilification of Mexico and Central American countries.[3] The stated pretext for "mass deportation" was to rid the country of "illegals," specifically violent criminals and gang members. But if the focus was on criminals, the math didn't add up to the campaign rhetoric of deporting millions. Many Hispanic Americans, by joining the Trump coalition, evidently did not consider that the dehumanizing intent of "illegal" could be applied to them. But their trust in Trump, whose policy of family separations at the US-Mexico border sparked outrage during his first term, was betrayed. Back in office, Trump revoked the protected status of 500,000 Cubans, Venezuelans, Nicaraguans, and Haitians, placing them at risk of deportation. This occurred after the staged, theatrical, and unlawful deportations of hundreds of black and brown Latinos, Africans, Haitians, and Asians, citizens and noncitizens alike, to Panama, South Sudan, and El Salvador instead of to their home countries. Many of those deported had no criminal records, had been deprived of due process and were condemned to rot in a brutal El Salvadoran gulag. Needless to say, some white Trump supporters who believed that only those with criminal records would face deportation had their lives upended by the detention of their own spouses, relatives, and other undocumented members of their communities.

Since the election, we have been told, *ad infinitum*, that those Latinos, women, and even those African American men who supported Trump, claimed, like nearly 70 percent of all Trump voters, that the economy, specifically inflation, was the most important issue for them. The desire for such a rational explanation for the reelection of a convicted felon further disqualified by his disastrous first term, notable for his mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic and his inciting the seditious January 6 insurrection, absolves the American electorate and the media they consume of responsibility for such a shocking ethical lapse. The economy was also an important

concern for African American voters, many of whom are working class. Harris carried African American male voters (roughly 7 percent of the US population), 78–20 percent (a slight change from 2020 when Biden won them 79–19) suggesting that these voters' choice was shaped by something other than narrow economic interest.

A wider view of the public interest was clearly evident among African American women. An Associated Press survey found that six out of ten Black women voters cited the fate of American democracy as the most important factor in determining their vote, adding that they were "very concerned" that a Trump victory would lead the nation toward authoritarianism. Tameria Warren, an African American woman environmental engineer and professor in Columbia, South Carolina, mentioned climate change, education, and racial justice as issues likely to be adversely impacted by a second Trump presidency. "When I look at elections," she said, "I really don't look at what it means to me, but what does it look like for us as a whole. I'm worried."[4]

How is it that African American women, historically subjected to horrific violence and abuse with no hope of justice for much of the time the United States has existed, have become among the most committed and articulate defenders of American democracy? For whatever reasons, not enough voters in 2024 brought this conception of social welfare, of issues related to the common good, such as gun safety, labor rights, reproductive freedom, and the paramount global issue, climate change, to their choice on the ballot.

Among black women's political priorities, concerns over the fate of the United States as a multiracial, inclusive democracy loomed large. African American women activists and academics broke the silence in postelection media coverage on racial and gender animus as likely factors explaining the election results. Some voiced dismay over white women's majority support for Trump, despite his role in overturning *Roe v. Wade*, and depriving many women in states banning abortion of access to reproductive health care. According to Melanie Campbell of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, 52 percent of white women (a group amounting to nearly 31 percent of the US population) "voted against democracy, against women's interests, for a racist, for somebody who is proud to have taken away our right to choose."[5] The mainstream or legacy media's campaign coverage favored Trump, with the CEOs of two major news organizations vetoing their editorial board's endorsements of Harris. According to legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, media coverage drove narratives of Harris's supposed flaws while subjecting Trump to "identity-based preferential treatment."[6] Crenshaw's pointed reference to white identity politics as shaping media coverage that favored Trump raises the question of why many whites supported him (white men, about 31 percent of the US population, backed Trump 59–39) despite his evident unfitness, and despite Harris's avoidance of an identity politics of race and gender and her economic agenda, albeit incremental, seeking to benefit middle- and working-class Americans, including affordable housing, reproductive rights, support for home health care for the elderly, clean energy, and tax cuts for middle-class Americans. The false narratives and disinformation propagated by the US right-wing media ecosystem

elevated perception over reality in the minds of many voters of all backgrounds. A number of contributors to this forum reflected on the pernicious effects of online social media as reality-distorting cesspools of conspiracy theories, misinformation, extremism, and far-right ideology, particularly for disaffected young men.

There was also the question of why seven million voters voted for Biden in 2020 but did not bother to vote for Harris, notwithstanding the far-right policy agenda known as Project 2025, published by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. The policy prescriptions in Project 2025, authored by officials who served in Trump's first administration, promised to undo decades of social progress. The plan, leaked to the public during the campaign, was so extreme and unpopular that Trump disavowed it. Its provisions included: a purge of federal employees, replacing them with pro-Trump loyalists; imposing federal bans on the honest teaching of American history; eliminating the Department of Education; and enacting a white Christian nationalist agenda hostile to civil and voting rights, abortion rights, and LGBTQ rights.[7] All of this, and much more, has come to pass. Not surprisingly, the administration's chaos, corruption, and destructiveness, targeting the rule of law, higher education, free speech, the media, scientific and medical research, and the nonpartisan civil service, and the total acquiescence to these attacks by the Republican-controlled Congress, have met with a fierce backlash of prodemocracy mass protests nationwide.

While it has been reflexive among many postelection commentators, including some of the contributors to this forum, to highlight the failings of the Democratic party, the choice between stability and chaos, between multiracial democracy and white nationalist despotism, could not have been clearer in 2024. While most commentators cited such issues as inflation and immigration as driving the outcome, these issues do not fully explain Harris's defeat. Some observers held that a right-wing media ecosystem, including Fox News, Sinclair, and social media platforms, not to mention television attack ads, wildly misinformed an electorate susceptible to an irrational politics of grievance.[8] Those parts of the American electorate that voted for Trump, shifted to Trump after previously voting for Biden, or refused to vote at all, must in the end share accountability for the destruction of government agencies, the assault on the rule of law and due process rights, and the sowing of terror as immigrant adults and children are snatched by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents from their homes, workplaces, and schools.

The world is watching a steady descent into despotism, hinting at darker depths to come. The Trump administration unlawfully sent the US military into Los Angeles to quell protests of its brutal and unconstitutional ICE raids. Though not without legal challenges from Democratic Party State Attorneys General and the federal judiciary, Trump acted on his long-stated intention to deploy US military forces against American citizens to suppress protests. The open racial and gender resentment of the administration enables the march toward authoritarianism. We have seen the arrest and indictment of a black woman member of Congress, Rep. LaMonica McIver, simply for exercising her lawful oversight authority, outside a private detention facility in Newark.

That, and the manhandling by federal agents of Sen. Alex Padilla, shoved to the floor and handcuffed after being forcibly removed from a briefing on ICE detentions in California, indicates what may be in store for other Democratic Party officials opposing the administration's abuses of power. Though African American and Latino officials have been targeted by thuggish attempts to silence dissent and intimidate political opposition, theatrical displays of force, which double as authoritarian propaganda, will not stop there. Now that the stated pretext for deportations of those with criminal records has morphed into outright racial profiling by masked ICE agents, disappearing hardworking, law-abiding brown-complexioned and Spanish-speaking people and ripping apart their families, the administration seems to think that shows of force targeting black and brown elected officials and detentions of people (abetted by deceitful justifications) will benefit them politically.

It is not simply the bloodlust and cruelty of the hardcore MAGA base that concerns me,[9] but the dangerous ignorance, apathy, gullibility, and self-righteousness that abounds within the American electorate. Either intentionally, or by default, in 2024 too many Americans, indoctrinated by fearmongering and lies, forged their identities and politics on the backs of the debased "other" of their imaginations.

Many African Americans are old enough to have experienced the tyranny of Jim Crow. Black American women are likely to view authoritarian rule from the perspective of having overcome the not-too-distant memory of the brutality and powerlessness of slavery and segregation. African Americans are not monolithic, but most tend to recognize political threats to their well-being. Eighty-three percent of African Americans chose Harris in 2024. A similar pragmatism was shown by the forty-three percent of white Americans who backed Harris. What about the rest, the fifty-five percent of whites who chose Trump? Since the days of Jim Crow, and afterward, white supremacist beliefs caused many white people, North and South, to fear that the exercise of citizenship by black people would oppress whites. In a perverse projection, whites under this spell feared that political power wielded by African Americans could only be retaliatory, that "they would do to us what we did to them." This fear of rule by the racialized other, inflamed during the Obama interregnum, combined with twenty-first century fears of the loss of a white majority in the United States, explains the mindset of adherents of white Christian nationalism who anoint Trump as a messianic avenger against an inclusive, multiracial democracy. W. E. B. Du Bois famously described a psychological and public wage of white identification, contrasted with a material wage, that led poor whites to regard themselves superior to all black people.[10] This consolation prize, uniting poor and wealthy whites under the banner of white supremacy, helped consolidate the dominance of powerful whites in the post-Reconstruction South while leaving the majority of white people impoverished, sickly, and disenfranchised. Similarly, many white evangelicals today appear willing to tolerate authoritarian, kleptocratic rule on behalf of billionaires and their own loss of health care and other social services in exchange for the subordination of despised citizens of color, women, and queer people.

In 1962, James Baldwin identified the threat to United States posed by those Americans whom he described as innocents, unwilling to face the poverty, police brutality, and psychological suffering inflicted on African Americans, particularly in the urban ghettoes outside the Jim Crow South.[11] The alarming speed with which the Trump administration has amassed unchecked power, destabilized the US economy, and militarized the government's capacity to expand mass detentions and deportations of immigrants has disabused many Americans of a similar innocence of, or indifference to, the terror being inflicted on their neighbors, regardless of their status. On June 14, an estimated five million Americans took part in "No Kings" protests, denouncing billionaires' autocratic aspirations, and defending the Constitution, immigrants' rights, and American democracy. Although the hour is late, it remains to be seen whether enough Americans of all backgrounds will reject the racist dehumanization targeting immigrants, and emulate those who take seriously the moral responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy.

Notes

1 Rebecca Davis O'Brien and Nicholas Nehamas, "Michelle Obama Makes a Searing Appeal to Men: 'Take Our Lives Seriously,'" *New York Times*, October 26, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/26/us/politics/harris-michelle-obama-michigan.html

2 The racial demographics of the vote in the 2024 election, here and elsewhere in this essay, are taken from Michael Tomasky, "Latino Men Were the Big Defectors—But They Weren't the Whole Story," *The New Republic*, November 6, 2024, https://newrepublic.com/article/188064/trump-victory-2024-latino-men-harris-defectors; and Maryann Cousens, "2024 Post-Election Survey: Racial Analysis of 2024 Election Results," *Navigator Research*, December 11, 2024, https://navigatorresearch.org/2024-post-election-survey-racial-analysis-of-2024-election-results/

3 Gustavo Arellano, "Trump was Winning with Latinos: Now, His Cruelty is Derailing Him," *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 2025, https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-07-02/trump-latinos-2024-ice-raids

4 Kenya Hunter, "Feeling Betrayed by Increased Minority Support for Trump, Black Women Say They're Stepping Back," Associated Press News, November 24, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/trump-black-women-democrats-harris-base-votecast-0c646e888c999b03d1798e1aa1331937; and Suzette Hackney, "Black Women Say They're Exhausted after Election, but Won't Give Up Activism," *USA Today* , December 10, 2024, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2024/12/10/column-black-women-tired-resilient-election-activism/76688762007/

[5] Gloria Oladipo, "'This is not time for retreat or apathy': Black Women Dissect Harris Loss," *The Guardian*, December 4, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/04/black-women-harris-election-loss

[6] Oladipo, "'This is not time for retreat or apathy': Black Women Dissect Harris Loss."

[7] Robert L. Borosage et. al., "The Plot Against America," *The Nation*, June 2024, 25–56; and Michael Harriot, "I Read the Entire Project 2025: Here are the Top 10 Ways It Would Harm Black America," *The Grio*, July 15, 2024, https://thegrio.com/2024/07/15/i-read-the-entire-project-2025-here-are-the-top-10-ways-it-would-harm-black-america/

[8] Tomasky, "Latino Men Were the Big Defectors"; and Karl Bode, "America's Right-Wing Propaganda Problem Might Be Terminal," *Dame Magazine*, January 2, 2025, https://www.damemagazine.com/2025/01/02/americas-right-wing-propaganda-problem-might-be-terminal/

[9] Zack Beauchamp, "'He's not hurting the people he needs to be': A Trump Voter Says the Quiet Part Out Loud," *Vox*, January 8, 2019, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/1/8/18173678/trump-shutdown-voter-florida

[10] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 573–74.

[11] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963; Vintage Press, 1993), 5–10.

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