

There Is a Way for Democrats to Stop Trump and Save America

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By Ben Rhodes

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You are meant to feel powerless. That is what a strongman wants: to make you feel as if nothing can stop the takeover of your country.

The richest man in the world is [destroying](#) parts of the government. A former weekend Fox News host runs the Pentagon. There is the potential for [corruption](#) on a [huge](#) scale. The global order is being [deconstructed](#). Allies are being [humiliated](#) and dictators [embraced](#). [Threats](#) of [territorial expansion](#) are repeated until they are no longer funny or fanciful. Everything feels extreme. Yet there are no mass protests, no corporate or cultural pushback, no daylight between Republicans and only a faint pulse from the Democrats.

That paralysis can be chalked up to the fact that Americans elected Donald Trump despite knowing the risks he posed. This has prompted a public soul-searching among Democrats. But their tactics only seem to highlight their own powerlessness: whether holding [press conferences](#) in front of shuttered federal agencies, displaying paddles marked “FALSE” and “MUSK STEALS” when Mr. Trump [addressed Congress](#) or [capitulating](#) during a recent fight over funding the government. And while the strategies being debated — from [strategic retreat](#) to [new approaches](#) to [communications](#) to various [policy](#) ideas — have merits, they fall short of arresting the country’s spiral into autocracy and oligarchy.

The hard truth is that the Democratic Party, in its current form, cannot lead the opposition that is required. Faced with a relentless onslaught from Mr. Trump, the party has lost touch with an electorate that sees it as emblematic of what they hate about politics, a polarized culture, overseas commitments and an economy where being middle class doesn’t feel like enough to get by.

The party has a credibility gap rooted in its initial willingness to support Joe Biden’s decision to run for re-election while warning that the stakes were existential. If that was the case, then why ignore the overwhelming [majorities](#) of Americans who believed that he was too old to run, and choose loyalty to a Washington stalwart over the country’s appetite for drastic change?

We are living through the reckoning of defending the status quo.

Yet there is opportunity in this drift: to reimagine what the party stands for, how it will fight its way back and who will lead it. Over the last few weeks, I’ve spoken to some members of the newer generation of Democrats in Congress wrestling with these questions, to the up-and-coming governor of Maryland and to activists who have battled authoritarianism in other countries. Their ideas leave me hopeful that there is a path for America’s political opposition if it casts off a top-down Washington strategy, stale talking points about democracy and the middle class and its own circular firing squads.

“If this is a unique, ahistorical challenge to American order and American traditions,” said Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, “you need to respond with exceptional tactics and messaging.” Mr. Murphy has kept up a frenetic pace in the media, narrating the extremity of Mr. Trump’s actions in real time. That heightened awareness mixed with unusual action is a necessary response to extreme circumstances.

Being cynical or apathetic will change nothing. Mr. Trump’s political opponents cannot wait for the MAGA movement to collapse under the weight of its own contradictions or a recession. Biding your time works only if the normal rules of political gravity still apply, and they don’t — not anymore.

The history of other countries captured by autocratic populist nationalism suggests that often it is a financial crisis, a war or some other major event that leads to the quashing of dissent. That may be when America joins the ranks of countries, like Vladimir Putin’s Russia, that turned to imperial conquest. If that sounds alarmist, consider that the relatively normal first Trump administration ended with a deadly riot amid a pandemic.

“The idea that we should sit back and let them collapse is ridiculous,” Mr. Murphy told me. “They are going to define their project as something legitimate if we don’t define them as something corrupt.”

A growing number of Democrats are right about the need for a populism focused on corruption: Mr. Trump and his billionaire cabal are redistributing wealth and power in ways that will harm most Americans. The administration offers evidence of this every day.

But this critique is only a starting point. Recently, the most promising signs have been seen in the actions of ordinary people protesting at Republican town halls and the enormous crowds that turned out in several states to see Bernie Sanders rail against oligarchy. Something is stirring. To succeed, the opposition must become a movement out in the country rather than a party trying to discover a formula in Washington.

Ece Temulkuram lost her country. She was [fired](#) from her job at the Turkish newspaper Haberturk in 2012 after she wrote columns criticizing the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. She left Turkey and watched it descend into autocracy; every crisis offered a pretext for power grabs against a “deep state,” opponents were harassed, the leader exalted, corruption normalized.

When I asked her about Mr. Trump’s return to power, she said that America was in the “shame stage” of losing democracy. Not only is Mr. Trump shameless, but his opposition feels a paralyzing shame watching a once-unthinkable reality take hold.

“As a citizen, you feel like this country was a paper tiger,” she told me. “All those institutions that we believed would stop this sense of insanity didn’t even exist. There is shame that comes from the defeat of a system that you’ve been living in.”

The challenge, for the opposition, is shaking off that paralysis.

Nika Kovac, a 31-year-old activist from Slovenia, has led successful movements against authoritarian politics in Europe. A few years ago, she helped transition a grass-roots movement to [protect clean water](#) into a coalition that mobilized a giant get-out-the-vote effort to [oust](#) a Trumpian right-wing prime minister.

“When you want to fight them,” she said, “you have to build huge coalitions around one particular topic, when they are attacking something that really matters to people.” Looking at the United States, she volunteered health care as a place to start.

The enormous cuts proposed for [Medicaid](#) and services for [veterans](#) are deadly serious for Americans, including many who voted for Mr. Trump or didn’t vote at all. Make that the basis for a movement.

Spotlight harms that will come to everyday people, not bureaucracies or the prerogatives of a loathed institution like Congress. Protest at shuttered facilities in communities, not agencies in the capital. Make noise however you can. Amplify the voices of people out in the country. Hold town halls where Republicans are afraid to. Boycott the businesses of specific billionaires, like Elon Musk. File lawsuits. Sign petitions. Organize communities, including deep red ones. Support people who get arrested. Create a culture around the movement.

Of course, health care is not the only issue to build on: Pushback could come on income inequality, housing, education, Social Security and free speech, to name a few. The broader idea is to create a series of issue-based movements that generate momentum and converge in elections this year and next.

This approach sidesteps purity tests and the pursuit of an agreed-upon national message that has shrunk the Democratic Party. “There’s a lot of folks who are nervous about getting into our tent,” Mr. Murphy said, “because they think they’ll use the wrong words, or they’ll get canceled, or if they’re with us on 11 out of 12 issues we don’t want them.” It is easier to invite someone into a movement if all you both must agree on is one issue, not a dozen.

This approach will not stop all the harm that Mr. Trump is doing or the danger he poses. But if you can get a win on one issue, it punctures the sense of invincibility and inevitability that a strongman relies on.

“The thing that is making him powerful now is he’s thinking that nothing can stop him,” Ms. Kovac said. “You need one victory.” When you get that win, people start to feel that they still have power because of what they did together. The actions of self-interested men like [Mark Zuckerberg](#) and [Jeff Bezos](#) matter less. Self-censorship gives way to strength in numbers. The grip of apathy and cynicism loosens. The weight of shame is lifted by collective action. This gives Democrats an opportunity to make that framing about corruption tangible.

Until the first Trump election, Andy Kim, the 42-year-old newly elected senator from New Jersey, had never run for anything. In 2017, his congressman voted to repeal Obamacare, and Mr. Kim decided to run against him, motivated by the grass-roots movement that had emerged to protect health care. That vote against Obamacare gave Mr. Kim a way to connect the dots for voters. When we spoke, he said he didn’t just attack his opponent for that one vote; he’d often ask voters, “Why is he doing it? Because he was taking hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions from special interests.”

That kind of money in politics is what people hate because it affects their lives. Mr. Kim was credible because he wasn't a politician. And he didn't just take on Republicans. In 2023, when Senator Robert Menendez, a Democrat, was charged for taking bribes of gold bars to do favors for Egypt's dictator, Mr. Kim announced that he would challenge him for the party's nomination. The party machine later threw its weight behind Tammy Murphy, the wife of the governor and a big Democratic Party donor. Running a guerrilla campaign, Mr. Kim not only won the primary, he sued to change a ballot system that favored Democratic machine politicians and went on to win the general election.

New Jersey voters know Mr. Kim will fight for them because he was willing to fight his own party. Sound familiar? Mr. Trump's hostile takeover, and occasional humiliation, of the Republican Party proved to voters that he was unafraid to take on a corrupt establishment that looked out for itself.

While Democrats are right to cast themselves as a party that opposes corruption and concentrated wealth, they are often deferential to a donor class that includes the same oligarchy they rail against, special interests with powerful lobbyists and aging politicians standing in the way of generational change.

How are you going to reform how politics works in this country if you won't reform how it works inside your own party?

You can't build movements without breaking things. That entails risk. You will lose some donors, antagonize some interest groups and even alienate some voters.

But nothing could be riskier than our current course. This country is being destroyed from within, and yet what are we talking about? We don't need a detailed new policy agenda from Democrats that they can't implement now and that most people will never read. We don't need politicians fanning out on podcasts about sports or culture or conspiracy theories where they'll make awkward guests.

We need authenticity. We need to know that the party is willing to fight for the things that matter most to people in this country and is unafraid to take on the special interests that are destroying it. Don't just tell us what policy or program you are for, tell us *why* you are for it. Show leadership by letting a new generation ascend. Look for people like Andy Kim who are showing courage and creativity in communities. Amplify *those* voices so there is a resistance that doesn't feel manufactured.

For all his flaws, Mr. Trump took control of American politics because he was an authentic outsider who led a movement. He saw people who were ignored by most politicians, and he transformed the Republican Party in their image. At a time when capitalism and technology have bred a crisis of belonging in this country, MAGA offers people community and purpose.

Gov. Wes Moore of Maryland is among the Democratic Party's most charismatic younger politicians. He identifies something essential about movement-building. The MAGA faithful "see a movement which did not just see them, but needed them," he told me. "There's something powerful about that, when you see that you are a useful part of the solution."

I believe that people across the country want to be asked to join an opposition where they can be part of the solution. I believe that most Americans don't want to rip health care away from veterans, defund schools or deregulate cryptocurrencies so that billionaires can scam ordinary people without consequence. I believe that most Americans do not want to destroy the economy through stupid trade wars or go in search of minerals in Canada or Greenland to suit the boundless ego of our president. I believe that most Americans are sick of culture wars that force us to care about the political views of athletes, the restroom policies of some school on the other side of the country or the programming decisions at the Kennedy Center. I believe that most Americans would rather raise their kids in a society that values empathy and not cruelty.

If you don't like what is happening to this country, you don't need to wait for someone to come along and save it: You need each other. That should be the message that Democrats embrace, because most Americans don't want to go where Donald Trump and Elon Musk are leading us.

The opposite of shame is pride. Let's be proud of fighting back, of caring about one another, of committing to rebuild what is being destroyed. Because America is not just about the powerful becoming more powerful; at its best, it is about the underdog beating the longest of odds.