

*Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority*

THE DEMOCRATIC

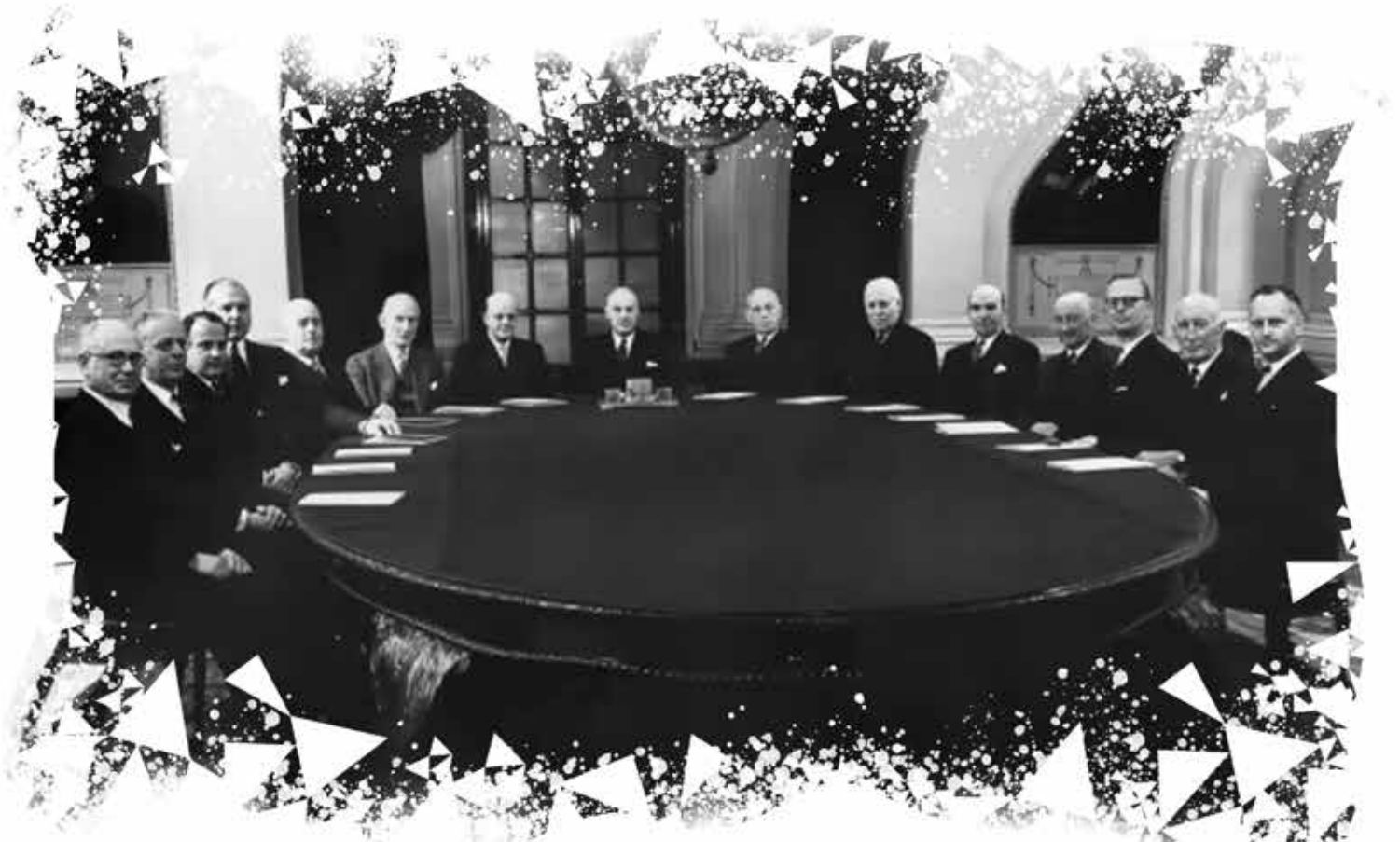
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## **TDS STRATEGY MEMO:**

**THE AMERICAN ESTABLISHMENT'S BETRAYAL OF DEMOCRACY  
THE FUNDAMENTAL BUT GENERALLY UNACKNOWLEDGED CAUSE OF THE  
CURRENT THREAT TO AMERICA'S DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS.**

BY  
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Recent articles in The Economist, The New York Times and elsewhere have outlined the extraordinarily detailed planning that is now underway in right wing think tanks and organizations that is designed to undermine the independence of a wide range of America's non-partisan political institutions and fill them with legions of MAGA loyalists if Trump and the GOP gain control in 2024. Across the entire range of government the goal is to insert political partisans who will be personally loyal to Trump and the GOP rather than primarily to the constitution and the traditions that underlie our democratic institutions.

In discussing how this dangerous extremism has come within striking distance of undermining American democracy, centrists and progressives offer different explanations. In a New York Times article titled "American Democracy is Cracking" Dan Balz offers the conventional "inside the beltway" perspective:

*"What's broken is the will of those in power to see past the divisions enough to reach compromise..."  
"The newer element, which has gathered strength in recent decades, is the deepening polarization of the political system."*

Progressives, in contrast, generally focus on three major developments that occurred since the 1990's:

1. The discrediting of traditional "news" and its replacement with a completely alternative "truth."
2. The ferocious demonization of Democrats.
3. The conversion of the GOP into an insurrectionary party whose goal is essentially sabotage rather than governance.

These three explanations are indeed important but their limitation is their relatively narrow focus on just the actions of the GOP and the right wing media.

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In reality, however, there is actually a more fundamental reason for why this threat has grown so profoundly dangerous. In recent years the interlocking set of economic, military/diplomatic and government/legal elites that used to be called the “*ruling class*” or “*power elite*” in the 1950’s and then the “*establishment*” in the 1960’s has, in the last few years, **very explicitly and decisively abandoned its previous commitment to America’s democratic institutions.**

***In a very real and practical sense this is the fundamental underlying cause of the current crisis.***<sup>1</sup>

To understand why this is the case it is necessary to first recall the American and West European elite’s commitment to democratic institutions in the period immediately after World War II .

On the one hand, there was a deep and profoundly gut-wrenching revulsion against fascism. The grotesque images of concentration camps, gas chambers and ovens where human bodies were incinerated were vivid and visceral. 300,000 American soldiers had died in the war and 670,000 soldiers returned home maimed and wounded. Among America’s elite there was in consequence a firm commitment that allowing new fascist dictatorships to emerge in America or Western Europe was simply not acceptable. It was as a result accepted that certain economic reforms were needed to prevent new economic depressions and that elites would also need to allow a certain range of other limited progressive reforms designed to moderate social conflict as long as they did not pose a clear and direct threat to the system. The most striking example of this attitude was provided by events in post-war Britain where the Labor Party forced through a series of reforms including massive taxes on property and inheritance that would previously have been absolutely unacceptable to the British upper class. The comparable compromises in the U.S. were the acceptance of trade unions, social security and other elements of what social commentators called the modern “*welfare state*” or “*mixed economy*.”

At the same time, preserving and extolling the West’s free elections and democratic institutions was also a vital element in the great ideological war against communism. In the war of ideas, the West’s example of democracy was far more compelling than its advocacy of capitalism. In both communist countries and the third world, “*America: the land of free elections*” was a far more compelling slogan than “*America: the land of free enterprise*.”<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of this perspective a complex network of new institutions was created to prevent a return to the crisis of the 1930’s. NATO, the World Bank, The United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and other international organizations were established and new “*elite*” organizations like the Council of Foreign Relations and The Business Roundtable emerged to reinforce this perspective.

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<sup>1</sup>The members of the “*power elite*” traditionally include Fortune 500 business owners and executives, military and diplomatic leaders and semi-permanent governmental officials many of whom have been educated in a select set of universities and are informally connected to each other by participation in an overlapping series of institutions and associations such corporate boards of directors, positions in national organizations and elite social clubs that help to create among them a common outlook and perspective.

<sup>2</sup>Outside of the major western countries, on the other hand, the situation was, of course, very different. In the third world the CIA and other clandestine groups within the national security establishment were entirely willing to dispense with democracy and conduct “*covert ops*” to overthrow freely elected governments if they challenged American economic or security interests.

This confident, triumphalist perspective found its way into the post-war civics textbooks which bombastically proclaimed that, because of our strong, 200 year old democratic institutions, *"It (fascism) can't happen here."*

Subsequent events seemed to validate this confidence. Most strikingly, the 1974 impeachment inquiry that led to the resignation of Richard Nixon seemed solid proof of the solidity of America's basic democratic institutions.

In major respects, Nixon would have seemed far more resistant to challenge than Donald Trump.

1. Nixon won the 1972 election with 60% of the popular vote -- 17 million votes more than his opponent. In contrast, Trump lost the popular vote 2016 by over 3 million.
2. Nixon had no personal business dealings that created conflicts of interest with his role as president. In particular he had no personal business dealings with foreign powers that were direct geopolitical antagonists of the US. Trump, in contrast, had extensive debts and other deep business obligations to Russia and was negotiating a major hotel deal with the Kremlin even as he ran for president.
3. While Nixon was found to have engaged in "obstruction of justice" and "abuse of power" in his attempts to sabotage the campaign of his opponent in 1972 his actions in this regard were far less extreme than those of Trump. Most dramatically, Nixon did not call for a mob of his "silent majority" supporters to assault the nation's Capital to stop congress from debating his impeachment.

Despite this, by the end of 1974 even the majority of Republicans in the Senate and House made it clear to Nixon that they would vote for his impeachment. His attempts to subvert the democratic process and use the IRS and other government agencies against his opponents were viewed as major crimes that were incompatible with his continuing to act as president.

This view was widely supported by the American "establishment."

1. Big business withdrew its support for Nixon. At the start of his administration 68% of business and professional people supported his administration. By the end of the year the level of approval had declined by a stunning 42%. No major business organization demanded that Nixon be allowed to continue in power.
2. Not a single sector of the military or national security establishment seriously considered any form of intervention to protect Nixon from impeachment.
3. The courts and legal system did not intervene to prevent Nixon's impeachment. On the contrary, in the years after Nixon's resignation a range of new laws were proposed and partially enacted to reduce the influence of big, secret money on politics and enhance the power of ordinary citizens. These reforms included various laws regarding campaign finance reform and otherwise reducing the influence of money on the political system.

In 1974 it therefore appeared clear that the American establishment basically remained committed to preserving democratic elections and the rule of law.

With the end of the cold war and Russian communism, however, this commitment began to steadily diminish, first under George W. Bush and then accelerating during Barack Obama's administrations.

In three key respects there was a clear decline in the establishment's support for Democracy in this era:

1. The Supreme Court reversed many of the campaign finance reforms enacted in the 1970's allowing secret "dark money" groups to flourish, removing limits on political contributions and eliminating key provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
2. A new generation of business leaders emerged who had ceased to feel any sense of social obligation and responsibility. The generation that had lived through the great depression and felt that business had a certain responsibility to society was replaced by new generations imbued with an extreme "free market" ideology – a toxic brew of Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman and "greed is good" Wall Street cynicism which held that business had no social responsibility whatsoever: executives could bankrupt their corporations and walk away with "Golden Parachutes" without shame while their employees' lives were devastated. Taxes were no longer the "price of civilization" but blatant highway robbery committed by lower class loafers and parasites.

This new ideology logically spilled over into a deep contempt and rejection of democracy itself if it dared to impinge on the untrammled freedom of the self-anointed "wealth creators" or treated them with anything less than groveling adulation.

3. Among the military there was a continued tradition of respect for civilian control of the military and the obligation to protect democratic institutions. The top American generals were largely highly educated men with a sophisticated historical understanding of what had happened in the 1930's but as it became more difficult to recruit high quality recruits (the academic scores of new recruits sharply declined in this period) a larger and larger proportion of new 19-21 year old recruits had to be drawn from the communities of wargame players, gun enthusiasts and right wing militia sympathizers – a problem that became extremely visible with the arrest of military intelligence cadet Jack Teixeira who was casually circulating top secret military data among right-wing discussion groups and promoting anti-Semitic clichés. As a result, America's military leadership has gradually become increasingly unsure about what would happen if they ordered their troops to defend democratic institutions against extremists.

Yet, despite this, Trump's desperate attempts to prevent Joe Biden's victory in 2022, culminating in the assault on the Capitol was so utterly outrageous that it should have been sufficient to firmly reunite the American establishment against his assault on democracy.



**But instead of uniting to end Trump's political career the American establishment meekly and pathetically capitulated.**

1. In the immediate aftermath of the January 6 attack, a range of major corporations promised to withhold all contributions to congressmen who had supported Trump's attempt to overthrow the rule of law – an action that would have decisively weakened the anti-democratic forces in America. Within six months, however, all these corporations had retreated from this promise and returned to financially supporting the 139 house members and 8 senators who had voted to overturn the election as well as the even larger group of Trump-supporting “fellow travelers” who continued to claim that the election was stolen.<sup>3</sup> Combined with the vastly increased financial clout of the ultra-wealthy Ayn Randian/megalomaniac wing of the billionaire class there is now no realistic hope that the business community will ever make any meaningful coordinated effort to resist the undermining of basic democratic institutions.
2. By the time of the Jan 6 events it was entirely clear that Trump genuinely threatened America's national security – that if allowed to return to office he would continue to divide and de-fund NATO and build an alternative American alliance with Vladimir Putin and other dictators. In fact, in any other country the events of Jan. 6 would be clearly defined as an attempted “*coup d'état*.”

The top generals in the pentagon fully recognized the direct threat Trump posed to democracy (Chief of staff Mark Milley explicitly compared the events of January 6th to the Reichstag Fire in Germany that allowed Hitler to take power). The tradition of civilian control of the military, however, prevented them from taking any independent action.

In short, the American establishment has abandoned any meaningful support for democracy, giving the extremist GOP and right wing media the freedom to organize an openly anti-democratic movement.

The actions of Trump and his allies has already provided a clear outline of the agenda he will follow if re-elected.

- He will insert into a wide range of government positions political partisans who will be personally loyal to Trump himself rather than primarily to the constitution and the traditions that underlie our democratic institutions.
- He will declare any election whose results he dislikes as “stolen” and use the power of the executive branch to invalidate the result.
- He will rule through a set of informal bi-lateral political alliances with big business, the religious right, the right wing MAGA community, the conservative media and others.
- He will communicate exclusively via friendly media and use government resources to weaken non-friendly media.

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.reuters.com/graphics/USA-TRUMP/LAWMAKERS/xegpbedzdvq/>

- He will order disruptive political protests to be suppressed by force (one need only remember that he seriously demanded during the Black Lives Matter protests that the Army should “shoot them in the legs”. General Mark Milley flatly rejected this proposal but a future head of the armed forces—one directly chosen by a newly re-elected Trump—might do otherwise.)
- He will rule based on a “cult of personality” rather than any explicit platform or formal agenda.

This authoritarian strategy has never been seen in an American presidential administration but it is not historically unique. Back in the 1950’s and 1960’s there was one major European country that did not return to democracy but remained a dictatorship – Spain under General Francisco Franco.

Here is a description of Franco’s Spain, based on the most authoritative published biography.

*Franco was a dictator and Spain was a single party state. In Franco’s Spain, the single party was a loose coalition, of which the fascist party, the Falange, was only a part.*

*The technique of Franco’s rule up to 1969 was to spread power among rival factions—big business and its technocrats, landowners, the church, the Falange, the army—and to control their respective gains and losses of strength. He was thus the indispensable arbiter of all major decisions.*

*Throughout Franco’s rule, the relative influence of the various constituent groups or “families” within this coalition fluctuated, but all groups were normally represented in the Spanish cabinet. The Catholic Church was a loyal supporter and through its monopoly control of education did much to reinforce the regime. One of the key reasons for the longevity of Franco’s regime was his ability to maintain a rivalry between these coalition groups with the permanent goal of securing his own position.*

*Spain under Franco had no democratic institutions. The “Cortes”, established in March 1943, did not have the right to initiate legislation or to vote against the government; it could only approve laws presented by the executive. Two thirds of the representatives were directly appointed by Franco or by one of his ministers.*

*The other key political characteristics of Franco’s Spain were the strict control over the media which did much to enhance Franco’s personality cult and the absence of basic human rights which made open dissent a hazardous occupation.*

*Although the civil war was officially over, Franco’s Spain remained on a war footing in order to counter the subversive threats from within. In the state budget of 1946, 45% was dedicated to the police the Civil Guard and the army – ‘the apparatus of repression’. Over 200,000 passed through the prison system during Franco’s rule, 2% of the total male population. Most country towns and rural areas were patrolled by pairs of Guardia Civil, a military police for civilians, which functioned as a chief means of social control. Larger cities, and capitals, were mostly under the heavily armed Policía Armada, commonly called “grises” due to their grey uniforms.*

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<sup>3</sup>[http://www.internationalschoolhistory.net/western\\_europe/spain/1945-53.htm](http://www.internationalschoolhistory.net/western_europe/spain/1945-53.htm). This summary is entirely based on quotes from Paul Preston’s authoritative biography of Franco.

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*Franco's personality also exhibited a fatalistic belief in his own destiny to govern Spain. Not only was he not going to give up, more importantly he would show no signs of giving up, the worse the news, he once advised, the bigger one must smile. 'I don't resign. For me, it's straight from here to the cemetery' Perhaps because there was always an element of fantasy about what he did, he was able, without a backward glance, to create a new goal, his own political survival, which he interpreted and projected publicly as a life and death struggle for the very soul of Spain...<sup>4</sup>*

There is a certain bitter irony in the fact that, although the majority of the American establishment rejected the model of Franco's "*fascismo al Espanol*" as a model for the U.S. in the 1950's and 1960's, a certain sector was quite open in their admiration for the Spanish system, seeing it as a superior alternative to the "soft" and "pinko" United States. William Buckley and others around the National Review, for example, were quite open and vocal in their support for Franco.

This view did not gain widespread support among the American establishment in the 1950's and 1960's because the stench of fascism was still too strong for it to gain any traction. But 70 years later Trump's version of Spain's *Fascismo al Espanol* stands perilously close to succeeding – and when it does the American establishment's contemptible abandonment of democracy will bear a heavy responsibility for its success.