

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

The topic of this issue of the Newsletter is the threat to the (somewhat) democratic form of government in the United States. The country was established as a republic in the late 18th century. The founders feared democracy as mob rule and resisted many of the democratic policies that had been established in state constitutions. Every state, except Virginia and Delaware, had extended the right to vote beyond real estate holders (New Jersey even allowed women to vote). In his opening remarks at the Constitutional Convention, Edmond Randolph said that the need was to deal with “the insufficient checks against the democracy.”

The United States Constitution was an elaborate system of internal checks designed to prevent the government from having much power. The system would be overseen by the “natural aristocracy” of educated white gentlemen. A president who would execute the wishes of the legislature would be elected by an electoral college based on the states’ power. Each state has two senators, so the smaller states would hold the power to elect the president, which is still true today *pace* Donald Trump continually asserting the opposite. For example, in the presidential election, a vote in Wyoming counts for 3.6 times as much as a vote in California.

The states refused to give up their power to a national or central government. That was especially true of states whose economies were based on slavery. A slave was counted as three-fifths of a person which gave added power to a slave state’s representation without the slave being a citizen and having a vote (the word slave does not appear in the document).

The 10th amendment to the Constitution says that “all powers not granted to *the United States* are reserved to the states and the people.” The contrast is not, as is usually said, between state and federal governments but the states and the United States. The result was a clumsy federation of 13 states. Today there is a serious question whether a federation of 50 states is governable at all. It would make more sense to have 10 or fewer regional bodies. James Madison said that “a nation without a national government ... is an awful spectacle.” That pretty well describes the present United States.

The question raised in the three essays that follow is whether the United States has already drifted toward an authoritarian government that would disregard the system of checks and a tone of civility in discussing problems facing the country. The question is not only important for U.S. citizens but for those of the other 190 countries who are wondering about the future of this “indispensable nation.”

AMERICAN RELIGION, AMERICAN PRIESTHOOD

By Gabriel Moran

America has existed since 1507 when Europeans coined the term “America.” The name referred to a continent but also to a strange place imagined as the fulfillment of a religious dream. The double meaning of “America” has never disappeared. When a new nation-state called itself “the United States of America” it announced two things; first, it had a “continental destiny” so that anyone else in America had better get out of its way; second, this new entity was something other and greater than one nation among many; it was the religious realization of human history.

From its beginning, the United States of America had an American religion that differed from European religions. Sometimes that was an improvement; it softened the Calvinism that the early settlers brought with them. Later, millions of Roman Catholics and Jews showed up, much to the horror of the “real Americans” who thought, as some still do, that this is a Christian nation (=Protestant). It could have led to bitter religious wars but the physical, social, and political conditions of the nation could also bring together the diverse religions under the aegis of America. Thus, “America” whose meaning is biblical in origin could unite American Protestant, American Catholic and American Jewish religions even while being restrained by these traditions (Islam poses a bigger challenge). Coming to America was in effect joining a mini-ecumenical movement.

There is also a quite frightening meaning of “American religion” in which America itself is the religion unrestrained by any tradition. By claiming to be America, the fulfillment of history, the United States was a danger to the whole world. Throughout the 19th century, the United States was a minor character on the world’s stage. But starting in 1898 when the United States began exercising its manhood it had the potential to do unimaginably destructive things in the name of apocalyptic America. Fortunately, it often channeled that power into constructive things as well. But politicians and military leaders acting for America are always a danger to the world.

The United States of America immediately began to move against anyone else occupying any part of America. The first obstacle was the natives of America who had to be displaced by any means necessary so that the U.S. could move west until it occupied the land from sea to shining sea. Movements north and south proved to be more difficult. Two American civil wars were fought in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1812 the United States coveted the vast land of the Canadas but after fighting for three years the U.S. ended with the same northern border as it had when it began the war. In 1846 the United States more easily defeated Mexico and took almost half of its land, much to the chagrin of those who thought the United States should have taken all of the land.

In the 1860s the internal contradiction of slavery within the land of liberty led to the “war between the states,” as it is called in the southern U.S. The United States of America and the Confederate States of America fought to decide who represented the real America. The Confederate States of America lost the war but many of the heirs to their “heritage” never gave up the claim to be a true part of America. Slavery was outlawed by the thirteenth amendment (except as a punishment for crime) but a conflict remained between

“the American” defined in 1790 as a free white person and the claims of other men and women to also be Americans.

Every student of “American history” learned that America was the most peace-loving country on earth. America only went to war reluctantly when free people were threatened by evil attackers. Americans did not like to fight but once they were in a war they were unstoppable. America never started a war and America never lost a war. Perhaps all those things are true of America but the history of the United States tells a quite different story. The United States has been almost constantly at war for dubious reasons and has often not succeeded. But war was the way to try unifying the United States as America.

The country started with well-regulated militias but not a standing army. When the United States declared war on Great Britain in 1812 (and nearly dismembered itself) it had 7,000 soldiers and 12 ships. When it invaded Mexico in 1846 it still had an army of 7,000. But to run an empire after 1898 it needed a large military. It sent 126,000 soldiers to the Philippines but in 4 years could not suppress the Philippine freedom movement. After World War Part II, the U.S. seemed ready to demilitarize; by 1950 it had drastically cut the army from 11 million to 554,000 men and cut the navy budget from 50 to 6 billion dollars. Secretary of State Dean Acheson said that “the Korean War came along just in time to lead to a quadrupling of defense spending”. It has henceforth continued to grow. The U.S. now budgets 700 billion dollars for the military – at a time that its health care is nearly the worst among developed nations, its bridges are falling down, it has no public transit outside of a few big cities, and many of its citizens are drinking poisoned water.

The United States, enveloped by the myth of America, is the most militarized country on earth. The claim that the military is under the control of civilian authority has long been fiction. Every president since Truman has been beholden to the military. It is true that there had been an attempt to keep the generals from running the country but Donald Trump has given over authority to the military. The public far from objecting has been relieved that the country is in the hands of generals. For example, until Trump, the Secretary of Defense (originally Secretary of War) was a civilian. And President Obama approved of every drone strike (which did not make it moral but at least there was some control). Under Trump the military can assassinate anyone in the world that it decides is an enemy; a button is pushed in Utah or Colorado and a missile comes screaming out of the sky to obliterate everything near its target.

Mythical America locates its authority in a priestly class who are held in awe by most of the population. The military is the only institution that is trusted by a majority of U.S. people. While 70% of people believe the military, less than 20% trust Congress and even a lower percentage trust the press. It is said that the only people who “serve” to defend America are the military. The United States has soldiers in 172 countries serving to defend America. That is, the nation of the United States is not threatened in any of those countries but the idea of America has to be defended.

It is not a disparagement of soldiers and sailors to point out that millions of people “serve” the good of their city, their country and the world. They risk their lives every day.

Living in a neighborhood where most of the buildings are a hundred years old, I am acutely aware that the fire departments on either side of me are defending and serving the public good and saving the lives of people. I hear the siren several times each day as the firefighters risk their lives for neighborhood, city and country. (And they serve in many ways. The three times when I have called 911 there were firemen running up the stairs with oxygen tanks on their backs within 5 minutes).

The death of a soldier, as well as that of a police officer, a firefighter, and others in the public service, is a special occasion which should be marked with solemnity. They deserve expressions of sorrow and gratitude to their families for a life that was dedicated to the public good. Lawyers, physicians and other professionals like to talk about doing some of their work *pro bono* but the actual phrase is *pro bono publico*. All work is done for a good; the professional's claim is to do work not for private gain but for the good of public life. The professional's promise to do good for others has a religious origin and still has religious overtones. There is nothing wrong with that. But modern professions are not religions. That includes the military which employs religious language ("semper fidelis") when talking about its "service to America."

Two words that the military constantly uses are "sacred" and "sacrifice," neither of which belongs in discussions of the horrors of war and preparation for war. There is nothing sacred about the work of the military; it is gruesome stuff which admittedly may sometimes be unavoidable. And soldiers who are killed do not sacrifice their lives, a word that means "make sacred." Like all genuine professionals, soldiers intend to defend life not get themselves killed. The 343 firemen and paramedics who were killed when they rushed into the World Trade Center did not sacrifice their lives. They were trying to save lives, including their own. Their deaths were heartbreaking but they were not sacrifices. The soldier who is shot in some country that most U.S. people have never heard of is not sacrificing his life for his country; he is tragically losing his life often because of the ineptitude of some higher up in the military.

Whenever I hear a general talking about their sacred work and sacrifices I think of this passage from Ernest Hemingway's World War novel, *A Farewell to Arms*. The ambulance driver says:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, and glorious, and sacrifice. I had seen nothing sacred and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words one could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity.

I think that the week of Oct. 15, 2017 may some day be seen as the first clear announcement that the generals were necessarily assuming command of the country with a puppet as president. The week began with Trump's clumsy attack on his predecessors when he was asked a simple question of why he had not acknowledged the deaths of 4 soldiers killed in Niger. He insisted that unlike his predecessors he always called the families of soldiers who had been killed. As a result of this false boast he was pressed into making such a call though he had no idea how to do it. He asked his general who

reluctantly (because only another military person can understand) told him what to say. Trump proceeded to call and said those words but without the pious tone that was needed. Six people heard what he said and all of them complained about his insensitivity to Myeshia Johnson, the widow of La David Johnson.

In defense, the military stepped forth in the person of John Kelly, a marine general whose son was murdered in Afghanistan. He conducted what was billed as a press conference. It consisted in a long sermon followed by a willingness to take “one or two questions.” The press sat there in solemn silence as he detailed how the dead body of a soldier is treated and the reaction of the family. He finished with a four minute tirade against a black congresswoman, Fredericka Wilson, a close friend of the grieving family. She had reported that Trump’s words were not well received by the family. Within a few days, her statement was proved to be accurate and a tape of a her speech that Kelly attacked showed him to be lying.

The press completely missed the point by focusing only on Kelly’s last four minutes and treated the rest of the speech as sacred words beyond criticism. They puzzled over his attack on Wilson, but that attack was integral to the speech and in some ways the main point. Kelly was not defending Trump. Kelly was defending Kelly. He said twice that he had told Trump what to say which is what Trump said (while tone deaf of course). Kelly was furious with Wilson for criticizing not only Kelly’s words but the first dogma of America’s military religion. Trump, repeating Kelly, said that the woman’s “guy” (he did not seem to know the soldier’s name) knew what he signed up for. It was almost the same phrasing that Kelly used about his own son and every soldier who makes the “ultimate sacrifice.” A martyr has to freely choose the path that he or she knows may lead to his or her sacrifice.

Kelly claimed that many things used to be “sacred,” including women, religion, and life. All of those things are no longer considered sacred but surely the death of a soldier and the grief of his family remain sacred. If the public does not understand that, it is because only 7/10 of one percent of the country is in the military. “They are the best that America has produced” so that Kelly’s son and Johnson died “surrounded by the best people in the world.” One might excuse such hyperbole but Kelly really meant it. Only gold star families can possibly understand the sacrifice that soldiers make. I don’t doubt that soldiers are generally good people doing their best in terrible situations but it is no help to them to fail acknowledging that the U.S. military is mostly composed of poor people, who could go no further in education and did not have a job. If they are the best that America produces, they are certainly not the best that the United States does.

The shocking conclusion to Kelly’s performance was to take a question only from someone who knew a gold star family. More shocking was that the White House press corps meekly accepted the general’s orders. As they were told the next day, it is not appropriate to debate a four star marine general. Peter Alexander had not asked for debate; he asked whether Kelly would be apologizing for his blatant lies. The general had made clear that the generals were in charge and intended to control what the press has to say.

THE LANGUAGE OF A MILITARY COUP

By Masha Gessen

Consider this nightmare scenario: a military coup. You don't have to strain your imagination—all you have to do is watch the Oct. 16 press briefing when the chief of staff, John Kelly, defended President Trump's phone call to a military widow, Myeshia Johnson. The press briefing could serve as a preview of what a military coup in this country would look like, for it was in the logic of such a coup that Kelly advanced his four arguments.

Argument 1. Those who criticize the President don't know what they're talking about because they haven't served in the military. To demonstrate how little lay people know, Kelly provided a long, detailed explanation of what happens when a soldier is killed in battle: the body is wrapped in whatever is handy, flown by helicopter, then packed in ice, then flown again, then repacked, then flown, then embalmed and dressed in uniform with medals, and then flown home. Kelly provided a similar amount of detail about how family members are notified of the death, when, and by whom.

Later in the speech, when Kelly described his own distress after hearing the criticism of Trump's phone call, the general said that he had gone to “walk among the finest men and women on this earth. And you can always find them because they're in Arlington National Cemetery.” So, by “the best” Americans, Kelly had meant dead Americans—specifically, fallen soldiers.

The number of Americans killed in all the wars this nation has ever fought is indeed equal to roughly one per cent of all Americans alive today. This makes for questionable math and disturbing logic. It is in totalitarian societies, which demand complete mobilization, that dying for one's country becomes the ultimate badge of honor. Growing up in the Soviet Union, I learned the names of ordinary soldiers who threw their bodies onto enemy tanks, becoming literal cannon fodder. All of us children had to aspire to the feat of martyrdom.

Argument 2. The President did the right thing because he did exactly what his general told him to do. Kelly went on a rambling explication of speaking to the President not once but twice about how to make the call to Myeshia Johnson. After Kelly's son was killed while serving in Afghanistan, the chief of staff recalled, his own best friend had consoled him by saying that his son “was doing exactly what he wanted to do when he was killed. He knew what he was getting into by joining that one per cent.” Trump apparently tried to replicate this message telling Johnson that her husband, La David, had known what he was signing up for. The negative reaction to this comment, Kelly said, “stunned” him.

A week earlier, Kelly had taken over the White House press briefing in an attempt to quash another scandal and ended up using the phrase “I was sent in,” twice, in reference to his job in the White House. Now he seemed to be saying that, since he was sent in to control the President and the President had, this time, more or less carried out his instructions, the President should not be criticized.

Argument 3. Communication between the President and a military widow is no one's business but theirs. A day earlier, the Washington Post had quoted a White House official saying, "The president's conversations with the families of American heroes who have made the ultimate sacrifice are private." The statement contained a classic Trumpian reversal: he was claiming for himself the right to privacy that belonged to his interlocutor. But Myeshia Johnson had apparently voluntarily shared her conversation with her mother-in-law and Congresswoman Frederica Wilson by putting the President on speakerphone.

Now Kelly took it up a notch. Not only was he claiming that the President, communicating with a citizen in his official capacity, had a right to confidentiality—he was claiming that this right was "sacred." Indeed, Kelly seemed to say, it was the last sacred thing in this country. He rattled off a litany of things that had lost their sanctity: women, life, religion, Gold Star families. The last of which had been profaned "in the convention over the summer," said Kelly, although the debacle with a Gold Star family had been Trump's doing. Now, Kelly seemed to say, we had descended into utter profanity, because the secrecy of the President's phone call had been violated.

Argument 4. Citizens are ranked based on their proximity to dying for their country. Kelly's last argument was his most striking. At the end of the briefing, he said that he would take questions only from those members of the press who had a personal connection to a fallen soldier, followed by those who knew a Gold Star family. Considering that, a few minutes earlier, Kelly had said most Americans didn't even know anyone who knew anyone who belonged to the "one per cent," he was now explicitly denying a majority of Americans—or the journalists representing them—the right to ask questions. This was a new twist on the Trump Administration's technique of shunning and shaming unfriendly members of the news media, except this time, it was framed explicitly in terms of national loyalty. As if on cue, the first reporter allowed to speak inserted the phrase "Semper Fi"—a literal loyalty oath—into his question.

Before walking off the stage, Kelly told Americans who haven't served in the military that he pities them. "We don't look down upon those of you who haven't served," he said. "In fact, in a way we are a little bit sorry because you'll have never have experienced the wonderful joy you get in your heart when you do the kinds of things our servicemen and women do—not for any other reason than that they love this country." When Kelly replaced the ineffectual Reince Priebus as the chief of staff, a sigh of relief emerged: at least the general would impose some discipline on the Administration. Now we have a sense of what military discipline in the White House sounds like.

TYRANNY

By Timothy Snyder

You submit to tyranny when you renounce the difference between what you want to hear and what is actually the case. This renunciation of reality can feel natural and pleasant, but the result is your demise as an individual – and thus the collapse of any political

system that depends on individualism. Observers of totalitarian governments have noticed truth dies in four modes, all of which we have just witnessed.

The first mode is open hostility to verifiable reality, which takes the form of presenting inventions and lies as if they were facts. The president does this at a high rate and at a fast pace. One attempt during the 2016 campaign to track his utterances found that 78 percent of his factual claims were false. This proportion is so high that it makes the correct assertions seem unintended oversights on the path toward total fiction. Demeaning the world as it is begins the creation of a fictional counter world.

The second mode is shamanistic incantation. The fascist style depends upon endless repetition, designed to make the fictional plausible and the criminal desirable. Through blunt repetition over Twitter, our president managed the transformation of individuals into stereotypes that people then spoke aloud. At rallies, the repeated chants of “Build that wall” and “Lock her up” did not describe anything that the president had plans to do, but their very grandiosity established a connection between him and his audience.

The third mode is magical thinking, or the open embrace of contradiction. The president’s campaign involved the promises of cutting taxes for everyone, eliminating the national debt, and increasing spending on both social policy and national defense. These promises mutually contradict. It is as if a farmer said he were taking an egg from the henhouse, boiling it whole and serving it to his children, and then returning it to the hen unbroken, and watching as the chick hatches.

Accepting untruth of this radical kind requires a blatant abandonment of reason. Victor Klemperer’s description of losing friends in Germany in 1933 over the issue of magical thinking rings eerily true today. One of his former students implored him to “abandon yourself to your feelings, and you must always focus on the *Führer’s* greatness, rather than on the discomfort you are feeling at present.” Twelve years later, after all the atrocities and at the end of the war that Germany had clearly lost, an amputated soldier told Klemperer that Hitler “has never lied yet. I believe in Hitler.”

The fourth and final mode is misplaced faith. It involves the self-deifying claims the president made when he said that “I alone can solve it” or “I am your voice.” When faith descends from heaven to earth in this way, no room remains for the small truths of our individual discernment and experience. What terrified Klemperer was the way that this transition seemed permanent. Once truth had become oracular rather than factual, evidence was irrelevant. At the end of the war a worker told Klemperer that “understanding is useless, you have to have faith. I believe in the *Führer*.”

Fascism despised the small truths of daily existence, loved slogans that resonated like a new religion, and preferred creative myths to history or journalism. They used new media, which at the time was radio, to create a drumbeat of propaganda that aroused feelings before people had time to ascertain facts. And now, as then, many people confused faith in a hugely flawed leader with the truth about the world we share. Post-truth is pre-fascism.