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The middle of a conversation

By Michael McAuliffe - December 2, 2020

The election results should have come as a relief, but it hasn't been the salve I had anticipated. I'm struggling with the fragility of the basic proposition of American democracy, of elected representation that can be determined, or at least experienced, through contorted paths of propaganda. Over half of Republicans in the U.S. think Donald Trump actually won re-election, despite the proposition being completely and objectively false. I see little to pierce the outer protective (isolating) shell of Trumpism. No one in the ecosystem dares challenge or correct the incestuous messages being passed like a torch from one hand to another -- of all-too-aggrieved and resentful individuals clinging together. They have made a decision to ignore what doesn't

For the past several years, it's been an intolerant base of Republicanism (morphing into Trumpism) that has immersed itself in a morass of dark falsehoods and fiction to obtain and preserve power. But the dynamic isn't limited to the far right. Both extremes of the populism spectrum are capable of telling tall tales to achieve their preferred ends. Both claim the right and righteousness of a cause, but these battles of the extremes kill the same victims first -objective, sometimes uncomfortable, truths and

reinforce and discard what doesn't already fit.



compromise. The extreme right has divorced itself from reality and doesn't care about truth. For the far left, truth still matters, but dissent, at times, is met with quick and withering judgment. It's not an equally scorched landscape, to be clear; however, the potential for damage inflicted by manipulation of ideas exists all along the ideological spectrum. My brother, a retired DEA special agent, lamented to me over the phone this week that he's lost

his belief in our collective national integrity. Trump has robbed — stripped — us of our faith in the institutions of government. (As a point of reference, my brother and I are privileged white men.) As former federal law enforcement officials (an investigator and a prosecutor), we are institutionalists who follow the rules, believe in public service, and depend on both for our ideological identities. Despite our ingrained tendencies to defend the exercise of power rather than challenge it, we've become more aware of the system's inequities and faults over the past several years; we've been increasingly receptive and more educated about the realities of systemic bias and its targeted harm in this country. Maybe once we admitted to ourselves that the country wasn't what we thought, we were in a position to question more assumptions in our lives.

Even with our expanded cultural mindfulness, we can't understand how tens of millions of people could observe Trump and his club over the past four years (more if one includes the 2016 campaign) and still cast a vote for more of it. We can't imagine a country where the people who lead our government actually disdain it. The first line of defense of liberty and freedom should be the good judgment of leaders who exercise public power. One can hold and express a range of political views and advocate for one policy over another, but the assumption is that our leaders have some minimal sense of affinity to the institutions they lead (read as "serve"). That tenet no longer exists. It's been cut into a thousand small remnants, through a sustained knife attack on the body politic.



I don't know how the political system gets fixed. And if it's not to be restored, but rather to be rebuilt, the process will take years and years of sustained effort. It will take the faith of more than just the Biden supporters. The distance between the intolerant far right and the activist left appears too far to bridge, too different to ever find common ground now. I don't see much cause for optimism other than that Trump is leaving office.

Except that the middle does feel more relevant now than at any time over the past three decades. We centrists are not everyone, nor should we be, but we may be the binder that keeps the spinning parts from flinging out, too often crashing and burning in uncontrolled flights of fancy or rage. Maybe progress right now is simple preservation. That's not something to dream about, but it's something to believe in.

Michael McAuliffe, a part-time resident of Chilmark, is a former federal prosecutor serving as both a trial attorney and a supervisory assistant U.S. attorney at the Department of Justice. McAuliffe also served as the elected state attorney for Palm Beach County. His novel, "No Truth Left to Tell," was published in March 2020.







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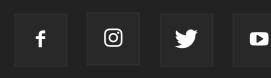
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