

October 2020

Dear Peter,

I am writing to your future self from a precarious time. Your second birthday is a few months away, and Donald Trump is the president of the United States. I hope that you will not have the opportunity to personally remember the Trump presidency, but I want you to be aware that it happened. If things get better for the United States, then I want you to understand the seriousness of these circumstances—I want you to understand that what I am about to describe really happened, and it happened during your lifetime. If things get worse, then I want to mark this turning point. There is a risk that Trump-like behavior will begin to seem conventional among leaders. We must take pains to note how radical of a departure Trump was from even the very worst politicians of his time who managed to achieve comparable success on a national scale.

This letter is not about debate between conservative and liberal positions, or right-wing and left-wing positions. Those topics are important, but here I focus on a more basic issue. In 2016, the US elected an abnormally evil politician to its highest office—one for whom transparently racist and authoritarian outbursts are not only common, but the very core of his public identity. Trump is not an ordinary politician; he is an existential threat to the effort to build and maintain an ethical democracy. Striving to undermine his influence is a cause that should unite all principled people, liberal or conservative. The fact that large numbers of people continue to support and celebrate him in the face of his obvious and overwhelming malevolence baffles and dismays me. The act of cheering for Trump at this point in history is not conservative; it is abominable. It is not merely an opinion I disagree with; it is monstrous.

I am not saying here that Trump supporters are monsters. They are people like you and me. But they have spent the last five years giving in to some of their darker and more hateful impulses. Day after day, they have cast ethics aside in the service of their allegiance to this administration. They did not merely make a mistake. I expect that by the time you read this letter you will already know, in some sense, that Trump was a disastrous president. I want to convey to you that this fact was not uncovered by historians—it was obvious at the time. I will provide specifics momentarily, in the form of the president's unmistakable words and deeds.

Every period in history, the present included, features some widespread unethical behaviors—behaviors that may be hard to see as unethical as long as they are so decidedly normal. For some once-common practices, we might now say, “obviously that was wrong, but some people might not have realized it at the time—they were limited by their environment and lacked the benefit of our perspective.” We might argue that hindsight allows us to celebrate the few who saw the problem as it was happening, recognize that it was wrong, and understand the limitations faced by those who participated in the flawed system anyway.

I write to you now, Peter, to express that supporting Trump is not like that. It is not one of those problems that are so much muddier and harder to recognize in their own time. Supporting politicians who say the terrible things that Trump has said was not normal before his candidacy, and it is difficult to imagine that any adult in the US lacks exposure to enough information about Trump's words and deeds to be aware of his radical departure from contemporary standards of ethical leadership. People support him in spite of it—or, in some cases, because of it. No hindsight is necessary and no excuses are sufficient. Trump's malignance manifested in plain view and against the constant, vehement protest of countless voices. It was not difficult to be on the right side of history during the Trump administration. Those who continue to support Trump

do so willingly, and we must register what they have shown themselves to be capable of. A large number of people—including dozens in your own neighborhood, even some in your own family—chose to be on the wrong side.

If my words come across as harsh, I ask that you finish reading the letter and then revisit that assessment. Many of us—journalists, scholars, Americans in general—have devoted considerable effort over the past five years toward understanding Trump supporters’ perspectives. It has become clear that many of them do not extend the same courtesy to Trump’s detractors. Still, I am making this letter available on the internet. If any reader believes that I am unfair to Trump, I ask that they first read the entire letter, and then bring any inaccuracies to my attention. I promise that I will acknowledge and correct inaccuracies, if found, and keep previous versions of the letter public for the sake of transparency. However, readers need not waste their energy making the case that, even if I have my facts straight, it is uncharitable for me to begin with the view that Trump is repugnant. Read the letter first. Some things are so wrong that it would be absurd to describe them without acknowledging their wrongness in some way.

Before Trump won the 2016 election, many people expressed grave concerns about the state of American political discourse simply because he had become a serious contender. For example, a few days before the election, I wrote the following.

Trump’s ascendance represents a victory for fear, hatred, thin-skinned nationalism, and authoritarian hero-worship. His supporters include a great number of dangerous and despicable people (like the KKK’s David Duke and his White supremacist kin). Many other Trump supporters seem to like being on a bandwagon and are deeply and willfully ignorant. As far as I can tell, they try not to think about the unforgivably nasty things Trump continues to say and do because they like the idea of lashing out and punching the world in the face, consequences be damned. Some simply think he will promote conservative policies, and [they] view such policies as more important than the fact that he is a figurehead for a totalitarian movement. All of this—from the enthusiastic embracing of Trump’s dictatorial personality to the begrudging, tentative support for his hypothetical policies and empty promises—is dangerous.

When Trump won, I noted that “a near-majority of voters elected a man who says and does things that, in a different context, nearly everyone would agree are wrong.”

As many have pointed out, it is unproductive to say that all the people who voted for Trump are irredeemable as people. However, let us not ever forget this specific irredeemable decision they have made. We must publicly repudiate this decision at every opportunity. We must help the people Trump tries to harm. We must act thoughtfully in a world where the president does not act thoughtfully. We must teach our children and our students to act thoughtfully. And, regardless of our political affiliations, we must recognize the ascendance of Trump as a grave injustice—we must unite to temper the message his election sends to the country and the world.

Since then, I have had a refrain of sorts: “Constant criticism is the only intellectually and morally honest response to this president.” I feared, however, that we would exhaust ourselves objecting to his leadership and eventually come to view it as something ordinary or even acceptable. To repeat a line from the first paragraph of this letter, I feared that Trump-like behavior would begin to seem conventional among leaders.

Again, constant criticism is the only intellectually and morally honest response to this president. And yet, in recent months, some people seem to have reached the point of exhaustion. I have seen people make comments along the lines of “he’s not perfect, but some people are so quick to criticize him” or “Trump-bashing gets in the way of the unity we need to move forward.” This sentiment is wrong. It is wrong from a conservative perspective, from a liberal perspective, from a “not interested in politics” perspective. Trump is not just another participant

in an ongoing debate, with his own defensible opinions that can be talked through. He has made it clear from the beginning that his political stance is not primarily about policy ideas; instead, it is about authoritarianism, bigotry, and a hunger for unquestioning loyalty and obedience.

He has done so many abhorrent things—things that are abhorrent to conservatives and liberals alike, things that are abhorrent to all reasonable people. He has indicated that he will accept the outcome of the election as valid only if he wins. He has repeatedly attempted to undermine the credibility of the press and anybody who questions him, as though he considers it normal to take the words of leaders as truth without scrutiny. He routinely refuses to engage with evidence or provide evidence-based justifications for his policies. He called White supremacists “very fine people,” called Mexican immigrants “rapists,” bragged about sexual assault, declared he was above the law, tried to ban Muslim immigration to the US. He recklessly and uncompromisingly promoted policies that tore innocent children away from their families in order to seem tough on immigration. Trump’s words and deeds have been so far beyond the boundaries of acceptable public dialogue for so long. Some appear tempted to repaint those boundaries to cast him as just another politician, sometimes getting things right and frequently getting them wrong. I write this letter in part to challenge that framing of the situation. After he took office, I wrote, “Trump is trying to further normalize bigotry. We must be careful not to change our benchmarks for political compromise based on the fact that he has begun his term so far beyond the pale.” I now believe that benchmark shift has already happened and risks contaminating legitimate political dialogue for years to come.

In this letter, Peter, I hope to convey the straightforwardness and audacity of Trump’s evil. This letter is not about complex political technicalities or detailed policy analysis. It is about seeing a man say and do things in plain view that any child could understand are wrong. Although I am addressing your future self, even at this moment, less than two years old, you could probably understand that most of these things are wrong.

### **Specific Words and Deeds**

So far, I have expressed a strongly-worded indictment of Trump, and I have asked you to wait until you finish the letter to decide whether I am being too harsh. I feel compelled to list many specific examples of the president’s words and deeds, lest you get the impression that I am exaggerating. I acknowledge that this letter is very long. After toying with various communication strategies, I decided that a long letter was the only way to convey how overwhelming this situation feels to me, and how baffling and unsettling it is that anyone could live through it and cheer for Trump.

Trump has said and done many terrible things beyond what I list here. He displays evidence of the kind of person he is on a daily basis. There have been many controversies surrounding his administration that I largely ignore in this letter (e.g., he ran a fraudulent “university”; he did not release his tax returns despite a strong norm for presidents to do so; he had several affairs and paid hush money to keep information about them from spreading). I have probably missed some of the more important ones. You must understand that living through this time feels like an endless barrage of unforgivable offenses, coming so quickly that one struggles to keep them in mind all at once.

Also, I am making no effort in this letter to describe the specific abuses that led to Trump’s impeachment. I anticipate that the Mueller report will become a well-known historical document, and I encourage you to read it (or read about it) to learn more. As you read my letter,

keep in mind that everything it covers is in *addition* to the probable crimes described in the Mueller report.

My emphasis here is on events that cannot be chalked up to a reasonable difference of opinion—nor even a very fundamental philosophical disagreement between conservative and liberal policy positions. Most of my examples of Trump’s unethical behavior should be readily recognizable as unethical from a wide variety of political philosophies. Furthermore, I am focusing on examples that illustrate that Trump’s disastrous leadership is exceptional for his time, not merely that he advocates for the same policies as his mainstream contemporaries—even if in some cases those policies will seem ethically indefensible by the time you read this letter. In short, most of the content of this letter is nonpartisan—or rather, it would have been nonpartisan before Trump became the *de facto* leader of the Republican Party. Therefore, as you read this letter, keep in mind that I am leaving out all of the frustration I normally experience when politicians implement policies I vehemently disagree with. Trump does that, too, but here I am focusing on aspects of his leadership that go beyond policy disagreement.

Trump and his defenders routinely claim that the mainstream media and virtually all credible sources are unfairly biased against him. My strategy in this letter, to make the point as plain as possible, is to rely primarily on direct quotations from Trump himself. My examples do not hinge on special information or primary research from any one particular media source, and so I do not cite any media sources at all. In some cases, Peter, I state well-documented facts in order to provide you with enough context to understand the events I describe (e.g., “Kamala Harris was born in California”). I have endeavored to ensure that this background information is entirely accurate, but I welcome any corrections, however minor.

In short, my core source for the information in this letter is Donald Trump, and if any reader believes that my case against him is somehow built on anti-Trump lies, I encourage them to take it up with Trump himself. I attest that everything attributed to Trump in quotation marks is as Trump said or wrote it, with the caveat that different transcripts of audio may employ slightly different strategies to remove repeated words, add punctuation, and the like. I have taken pains to provide sufficient context to fully understand each quotation in this letter, but if you suspect that any statement is taken out of context, please look up the context and see for yourself. My examples are not comprehensive and they are not isolated events. They reflect Trump’s public persona faithfully, and it does not require much digging to confirm that they do. As I have stated above, I am sharing this letter publicly, and I ask that any readers who feel I have misrepresented Trump to point out *specific* quotations that are inaccurate. I care deeply about accuracy and will happily issue corrections.

## **Authoritarianism**

In this section, I provide examples of Donald Trump’s authoritarian and anti-democratic rhetoric and behavior.

### **Undermining Democratic Elections**

He has repeatedly claimed that the presidential election process is fraudulent and rigged against him, and implied that he would not step down from power if he lost.

**Trump would not agree to accept democratic election outcomes.** During a live presidential debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in 2016, both candidates were directly asked if they would accept the outcome of the election, even if they lost—the basic principle of using democratic elections to select leaders. Trump refused to make this promise,

instead saying “I’ll keep you in suspense.” During the same debate, he described the election as “rigged.” At a rally shortly thereafter, he said, “I would like to promise and pledge to all of my voters and supporters, and to all of the people of the United States, that I will totally accept the results of this great and historic presidential election—if I win.” He emphasized each of those last three words, to cheers and applause from the audience.

He has made similar statements so far in 2020. When a reporter asked him in July if he would accept the outcome of the election, he said “I have to see” and “You don’t know until you see.” He reiterated this sentiment several times. In September, in direct response to the question, “Will you commit to making sure that there is a peaceful transfer of power after the election?” he said, “Well, we’re going to have to see what happens.” In his first debate against Joe Biden, he similarly refused to agree to accept the outcome of the election until he knew what that outcome was.

**Trump fabricated stories of massive voter fraud favoring his opponents.** He won the 2016 election due to the electoral college system, despite receiving approximately 3 million fewer votes than Hillary Clinton. After the election, he claimed on Twitter, “I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.” He has repeatedly claimed that more than 3 million votes were illegally cast for Clinton, without even attempting to provide evidence or acknowledge that his claim is both wildly implausible and discredited by liberal and conservative sources. He doubled down on this idea shortly after taking office by issuing an executive order to investigate voter fraud. Later that year, he asked states to divulge private information about voters, and when 44 states refused, he wrote, “Numerous states are refusing to give information to the very distinguished VOTER FRAUD PANEL. What are they trying to hide?” In 2018, after the midterm elections, Trump publicly claimed that “Law Enforcement is looking into another big corruption scandal having to do with Election Fraud” in Florida, despite a statement from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement that there was no such investigation.

**Trump raised the possibility of delaying the 2020 election.** In May 2020, Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law and one of the many family members that he has appointed to adviser positions in his administration, declined to “commit one way or the other” about whether the election would be held as scheduled in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic (see the subsection below about COVID-19 within the major section on antipathy for truth). In July, as part of one of his then-routine social media posts about election fraud, Trump wrote, “Delay the Election until people can properly, securely and safely vote???”

**Trump engaged in a protracted campaign to undermine the credibility of the 2020 election.** Much of Trump’s rhetoric about the presidential election in the months leading up to it focused on unsubstantiated claims that mail-in voting would result in widespread anti-Trump “fraud” and a “rigged” election. For example, in April, he said in a press briefing, “It shouldn’t be mail-in voting. It should be: You go to a booth and you proudly display yourself.” In June, he wrote, “RIGGED 2020 ELECTION: MILLIONS OF MAIL-IN BALLOTS WILL BE PRINTED BY FOREIGN COUNTRIES, AND OTHERS. IT WILL BE THE SCANDAL OF OUR TIMES!” In July, he wrote, “With Universal Mail-In Voting (not Absentee Voting, which is good), 2020 will be the most INACCURATE & FRAUDULENT Election in history.” To avoid being asked to provide evidence for his claims, he often frames them as statements he has heard from unidentified others. In July, for example, he said that “these elections will be fraudulent, they’ll be fixed, rigged,” adding that “A lot of people are saying that probably will happen.”

He has connected his antipathy toward mail-in voting to his unwillingness to agree to accept the outcome of the election. In July, when asked if he would accept the election outcome whatever it may be, he said “It depends. I think mail-in voting is going to rig the election.” In his first debate against Joe Biden, when asked the same question, he again railed against mail-in voting instead of agreeing to accept the outcome.

In August, his election campaign sued the state of Nevada over legislation to expand mail-in voting in response to the pandemic. He called the bill “an illegal late-night coup.” He also opposed COVID-19 stimulus funding for the US Postal Service, saying, “They want three and a half billion dollars for something that’ll turn out to be fraudulent, that’s election money basically. They want three and a half billion dollars for the mail-in votes. ... they need that money in order to make the Post Office work so it can take all of these millions and millions of ballots.”

Trump has also sowed doubt about the security of ballot drop boxes, implying that they are a Democratic scam. He wrote in August that “Democrats are using Mail Drop Boxes, which are a voter security disaster. Among other things, they make it possible for a person to vote multiple times. Also, who controls them, are they placed in Republican or Democrat areas? They are not COVID sanitized. A big fraud!”

In September, Trump wrote, “Because of the new and unprecedented massive amount of unsolicited ballots which will be sent to ‘voters’, or wherever, this year, the Nov 3rd Election result may NEVER BE ACCURATELY DETERMINED, which is what some want.” This statement illustrates his particular enmity for mail-in ballots that voters request through their voter registration itself, rather than through a separate absentee ballot form. He characterizes the former as “unsolicited.” He has also described such ballots as “a scam” and “a hoax,” and harped on this point so much that “the ballots” became a catchphrase of sorts. In late September, he wrote a simple all-caps social media post, “WATCH THE BALLOTS!!!”

During his first debate with Joe Biden, Trump again said that the election would “be a fraud like you’ve never seen” and described it as “a rigged election” and “a fraudulent election.” He also scapegoated the Postal Service again, telling a bizarre, unsubstantiated story about “mailmen selling the ballots.”

Trump’s rhetorical relationship to the legitimacy of the election seems to amount to the view that it is legitimate only if he wins. In August, he said, “The only way we’re going to lose this election is if the election is rigged.” In September, when asked if he would support a peaceful transition of power, he said “Get rid of the ballots, and you’ll have a very—we’ll have a very peaceful—there won’t be a transfer, frankly. There’ll be a continuation.” Polling indicated at the time that he was unlikely to win the election. Many of us interpreted his relentless commentary in the months leading up to the election as an effort to hold on to power regardless of the democratic process.

This interpretation jibes with other authoritarian statements he has made. For example, at a Republican fundraising lunch in March 2018, Trump commented on recent revisions to the Chinese constitution allowing president Xi Jinping to stay in power, “He’s now president for life. President for life. No, he’s great, he’s—and look, he was able to do that. I think it’s great. Maybe we’ll have to give that a shot some day.” His audience laughed, but it is a dangerous thing for someone in his position—and with his leadership style—to joke about. In August 2020, in response to a crowd of supporters shouting “four more years,” he said, “If you want to really drive them crazy, say twelve more years.” The Twenty-Second Amendment to the US Constitution limits a president to a maximum of two four-year terms. Again, Trump

characterized this comment as a joke, but “twelve more years” has since become a favorite chant among some of his supporters.

**Trump called for his supporters and the police to “watch” voting locations.** In August, he answered a question about voter fraud and poll watchers by saying, “We’re going to have sheriffs, and we’re going to have law enforcement. And we’re going to have hopefully U.S. attorneys, and we’re going to have everybody, and attorney generals.” Such actions by law enforcement have historically been viewed as intimidating, especially for people whose right to vote has not always been respected. Some states (e.g., Pennsylvania) prohibit police at polling places. In September, Trump said “I’m urging my supporters to go in to the polls and watch very carefully, because that’s what has to happen.” Such a statement is reminiscent of historical voter intimidation. Most states require poll watchers to be officially certified, and all states prohibit them from intimidating voters. It would be illegal in most places for Trump supporters to simply walk into the polls and watch.

Worse still, Trump’s comment about urging his supporters to “watch” the polls came in response to presidential debate moderator Chris Wallace’s question, “Will you urge your supporters to stay calm during this extended period, not to engage in any civil unrest?” Wallace was referring to the period of time in which the votes are being counted, including mail-in ballots counted shortly after election day. Trump did not say that he would urge his supporters to eschew civil unrest; he merely urged them to watch the polls and repeated his claim about “a fraudulent election.”

**Trump has spread false rumors about candidates’ eligibility for office.** Trump became a noteworthy voice in politics when he began to promulgate the false conspiracy theory that Barack Obama was born in Kenya rather than the United States, which would have made Obama ineligible to serve as president. Trump claimed in 2011 that “the people that went to school with him, they never saw him, they don’t know who he is,” referring to Obama. This was not true. Furthermore, Obama had published his official Hawaii birth certificate in 2008, but Trump claimed that the document in question did not count as a birth certificate. Later in 2011, Obama also published the usually-confidential long-form version of the document, but that did not stop Trump from continuing to raise doubts about Obama’s eligibility for office. In August 2012, Trump wrote, “An ‘extremely credible source’ has called my office and told me that @BarackObama’s birth certificate is a fraud.” Baseless fraud accusations seem to be one of Trump’s favorite rhetorical tactics.

This year, Trump has spread some similar rumors about Kamala Harris, the Democratic vice presidential nominee. “I heard it today that she doesn’t meet the requirements,” he said in August. “I have no idea if that’s right. I would have thought, I would have assumed, that the Democrats would have checked that out before she gets chosen to run for vice president.” Harris was born in California.

Barack Obama and Kamala Harris are the first Black Americans to be nominated by a major political party for president and vice president, respectively. The relevance of this detail will become clear in the next major section of this letter, focusing on Trump’s well-documented bigotry.

## **Undermining the Separation of Powers / Checks and Balances**

Trump has also publicly repudiated constraints on his own power, even though such constraints are an essential part of the US Constitution and any legitimate system of government.

**Trump threatened to selectively prosecute his political opponent.** During the 2016 election campaign, one of the standard chants heard at Trump rallies around the country was

“Lock her up!” This chant referred to Trump’s repeated calls for Hillary Clinton, his opponent in the race, to be sent to jail. For example, in June he said, “Hillary Clinton has to go to jail.” In an October debate against Clinton, he said to her, “If I win, I am going to instruct my attorney general to get a special prosecutor to look into your situation.”

Once in office, he attempted to follow through on his promise to co-opt the judicial system to target his political opponent, but found it more difficult than he expected. “The saddest thing is, because I’m the president of the United States, I am not supposed to be involved in the Justice Department. I am not supposed to be involved in the FBI. I’m not supposed to be doing the kind of things that I would love to be doing and I’m very frustrated by it.”

**Trump threatened to break up courts that rule against him.** Shortly after taking office, Trump attempted to make federal funding for cities in the US conditional on those cities cooperating directly with federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement. In April 2017, a district judge blocked Trump’s order, placing a potential appeal within the jurisdiction of the 9th circuit court. When asked if he would consider proposals to break up 9th circuit court, Trump said, “Absolutely, I have,” and “there are many people that want to break up the 9th Circuit.”

**Trump seems to believe (or wish) that he was not constrained by laws and governmental procedures.** His frustration with not being able to unilaterally direct a criminal investigation against his former political opponent was not an isolated event. In April 2017, he complained about Senate protocol, “We don’t have a lot of closers in politics and I understand why. It’s a very rough system, it’s an archaic system. You look at the rules of the Senate, even the rules of the House, but the rules of the Senate and some of the things you have to go through, it’s really a bad thing for the country in my opinion. There are archaic rules and maybe at some point, we’re going to have to take those rules on because for the good of the nation things are going to have to be different.”

Later, Trump repeatedly interfered with Robert Mueller’s investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. For details, look up the Mueller report online. Here, I note only that Trump’s lawyers argued that he could not be guilty of obstruction of justice no matter what he did, by definition because of his position as president. They wrote, “It remains our position that the President’s actions here, by virtue of his position as the chief law enforcement officer, could neither constitutionally nor legally constitute obstruction because that would amount to him obstructing himself, and that he could, if he wished, terminate the inquiry, or even exercise his power to pardon if he so desired.”

In short, Trump’s relationship to the separation of powers can be summed up by a statement he made to the press in April 2020: “When somebody is president of the United States, the authority is total—and that’s the way it’s got to be.”

## **Promoting Violent Crackdowns on Civilians**

Trump has promoted violent crackdowns on people he perceives as political rivals.

**Trump called for an “occupying force” in cities “run by liberal Democrats.”** There were nationwide protests against police brutality and racism after a police officer killed George Floyd, a Black man, by kneeling on his neck for more than eight minutes in May 2020. Trump made his antipathy toward the protesters a centerpiece of his re-election campaign. In cases where some took advantage of ongoing protests to rob stores, or where police entered into violent altercations with protesters, Trump routinely claimed that these events were exclusive to “Democrat-run cities.” He also made a habit of inaccurately describing the protest movement as composed of, or led by, “radical-left anarchists.”



On June 1st, he described the protests as a “war” and called for an “occupying force” of “heavily armed soldiers” to “dominate” and enact “retribution.” Specifically, in an official statement, he said, “Today, I have strongly recommended to every governor to deploy the National Guard in sufficient numbers that we dominate the streets. Mayors and governors must establish an overwhelming law enforcement presence until the violence has been quelled. If a city or a state refuses to take the actions that are necessary to defend the life and property of their residents, then I will deploy the United States military and quickly solve the problem for them. I am also taking swift and decisive action to protect our great capital, Washington, D.C. What happened in this city last night was a total disgrace. As we speak, I am dispatching thousands and thousands of heavily armed soldiers, military personnel, and law enforcement officers to stop the rioting, looting, vandalism, assaults, and the wanton destruction of property.”

In a phone call with state governors on the same day, he said, “I wish they had an occupying force in there,” and “It’s like we’re talking about a war, which it is a war in a certain sense, and we’re going to end it fast.” In this phone call, he harped on the themes of domination and retribution, saying, “you have to do retribution in my opinion, you have to use your own legal system” and “You have to dominate. If you don’t dominate, you’re wasting your time. They’re going to run all over you, you’ll look like a bunch of jerks. You have to dominate, and you have to arrest people, and you have to try people and they have to go to jail for long periods of time.” Later, he said, “You have everybody on tape, you gotta arrest all those people, you gotta try them. And if they get five years or ten years, they have to get five years or ten years. There’s no retribution. So I say that and the word is dominate. If you don’t dominate your city and your state, they’re gonna walk away with you.”

He also made it clear that he was not focused exclusively on crime, but rather on cracking down on what he saw as a “movement.” He said, “we’re going to clamp down very, very strong,” and “This is a movement. We found out they’re delivering supplies to various place in various states, your people know about it now. But we found out many things, it’s like a movement, and it’s a movement that if you don’t put it down, it’ll get worse and worse.”

Within a week of those speeches, Trump apparently attempted to deploy thousands of active duty troops to the streets of Washington, D.C., but several of his advisors and senior military personnel talked him down, according to an anonymous official. Trump did send federal agents to challenge protesters in various cities, in some cases in unmarked vehicles, without visible identification badges, and wearing uniforms and equipment similar to those worn by members of the armed forces.

It should go without saying that using the power of the executive to deploy federal law enforcement against political rivals is abhorrent and antithetical to democracy. And it should be clear that Trump views this particular protest movement as his political rivals. Another recent high-profile protest took place in Lansing in response to the governor’s restrictions on commercial activity aimed at reducing the spread of COVID-19. Anti-government militia members carried guns into the state capitol building. Trump said, “These are very good people, but they are angry. They want their lives back again, safely! See them, talk to them, make a deal.” What a stark contrast with his language about anti-racism protesters. I will return to Trump’s relationship with racism in later sections.

**Trump has encouraged his supporters to enact violence.** During Trump’s presidential campaign in 2015, two White men beat up a homeless Latino man and then urinated on him. In explaining their crime to the police, they said, “Trump was right—all these illegals need to be deported.” When asked about the event at a press conference, Trump said, “It would be a shame,

but I haven't heard about that. I will say, the people that are following me are very passionate. They love this country and they want this country to be great again. They are passionate."

As his campaign proceeded, he suggested that he would back his supporters if they decided to lash out violently. For example, during a March 2016 rally, he said "If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you? Seriously, OK? Just knock the hell—I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees. I promise. I promise." At other rallies, he said of various protesters, "I'd like to punch him in the face," "get him the hell outta here," and "Try not to hurt him. If you do, I'll defend you in court. Don't worry about it." In at least some of these instances, his supporters did punch and kick protesters.

Trump continued to hold rallies after he took office, including during the 2018 Congressional election campaign. At one rally in October 2018, he praised Montana politician Greg Gianforte, who had pleaded guilty the previous year to misdemeanor assault for grabbing a journalist by the neck and body slamming him into the ground. Trump said, "Any guy that can do a body slam—he's my kind of guy." At another rally in the Florida panhandle in May 2019, Trump was talking about migrants approaching the southern border, and asked rhetorically, "How do you stop these people?" An audience member shouted out, "Shoot them," and Trump grinned back and said "That's only in the panhandle you can get away with that statement."

In August 2020, Trump commented on some of his supporters who had fired paintball guns at anti-racism protesters, saying that "paint is not bullets" and that the shooters "protested peacefully. They went in very peacefully."

Later in August, a reporter asked Trump if he would "condemn the actions of vigilantes like Kyle Rittenhouse." Rittenhouse is a 17-year-old Trump supporter who decided to patrol the streets with a semiautomatic rifle during an anti-racism protest. He shot three people and killed two. Trump said, "You saw the same tape as I saw. And he was trying to get away from them—I guess—it looks like—and he fell and then they very violently attacked him. And it was something that we're looking at right now, and it's under investigation. But I guess he was in very big trouble. He would have been—I—he probably would have been killed, but it's under investigation." The criminal investigation will no doubt focus on the details of the conflict or perceived conflict in which Rittenhouse pulled the trigger, but it is telling that Trump did not comment on his vigilantism itself. A minor wandered the streets brandishing a gun against protesters the president has described as engaged in a "war" and killed two people. No part of that should have been possible.

**Trump views police brutality as a joke.** He has made comments making light of police brutality, which are particularly concerning in light of his "occupying force" and "war" against protesters. For example, in 2017, Trump spoke to an audience of police officers, saying, "And when you see these towns and when you see these thugs being thrown into the back of a paddy wagon—you just see them thrown in, rough—I said, please don't be too nice. Like when you guys put somebody in the car and you're protecting their head, you know, the way you put their hand over? Like, don't hit their head, and they've just killed somebody—don't hit their head. I said, you can take the hand away, okay?" The audience laughed, but this is another dangerous topic for a president to joke about.

In 2020, Trump took his joking to a new level, mocking a journalist who had been shot with a rubber bullet while trying to document anti-racism protests in Minneapolis. He said, "We have the National Guard. And remember that beautiful sight? The street was a mess. That idiot reporter from CNN got hit on the knee with a canister of tear gas, and he went down, 'I've been hit. I've been hit.' He'd been hit. The one with the shaved hair, shaved hair—Maybe I'll do that

one day. I'll give it up—shaven. But he went down and he didn't like it. He was hit. 'Police brutality.' Remember that?" (The reporter in question worked for MSNBC, not CNN, and was hit with a rubber bullet, not tear gas.) Trump continued to describe the arrival of the National Guard, "Then you saw the first line. Then you saw the second line. Then you saw a third line, then you saw a fourth line. And then they said, 'March.' They never halted. Just walked right through, cleaned everything up, and Minneapolis was cured. They were cured." His language suggests that he viewed journalists and protesters as part of the same disease infecting the city, and that his vision of a "cure" involved an authoritarian crackdown—an "occupying force."

### **Extremist Rhetoric**

Trump's authoritarianism also manifests in extremist rhetoric against his perceived enemies. In one example described above, he framed crackdowns on civilian protesters as a military operation in a "war." Here are several other examples.

**Trump makes furious and reckless threats against foreign powers.** In August 2017, Trump threatened North Korea while simultaneously (and hypocritically) condemning them for taking their word choice "beyond a normal statement." He said, "North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen. He has been very threatening—beyond a normal statement—and as I said, they will be met with fire, fury and, frankly, power the likes of which the world has never seen before."

In July 2018, he pumped up his threatening rhetoric in an all-caps Twitter post directed at Iran: "NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS." The following year, he reiterated the sentiment in another Twitter post: "Any attack by Iran on anything American will be met with great and overwhelming force. In some areas, overwhelming will mean obliteration." Then, in January 2020, he added, "Let this serve as a WARNING that if Iran strikes any Americans, or American assets, we have targeted 52 Iranian sites (representing the 52 American hostages taken by Iran many years ago), some at a very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture, and those targets, and Iran itself, WILL BE HIT VERY FAST AND VERY HARD." Intentionally destroying cultural sites is considered a war crime by the International Criminal Court and violates the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. In October 2020, Trump reiterated his threats against Iran in vague but extreme language, saying, "If you fuck around with us, if you do something bad to us, we are going to do things to you that have never been done before."

**Trump threatens to use the military with little provocation.** Sending "soldiers" to confront domestic protests and threatening war with Iran are not the only examples of Trump calling upon the military hastily. He has also threatened military action to close the southern border. For example, regarding Central American migrants traveling through Mexico to reach the US, he wrote, "In addition to stopping all payments to these countries, which seem to have almost no control over their population, I must, in the strongest of terms, ask Mexico to stop this onslaught—and if unable to do so I will call up the U.S. Military and CLOSE OUR SOUTHERN BORDER!"

**Trump has advocated the death penalty for nonviolent drug dealers.** In a speech in March 2018, Trump praised several authoritarian regimes for executing drug dealers. He said, "The only way to solve the drug problem is through toughness. When you catch a drug dealer, you gotta—you gotta put him away for a long time. When I was in China—and other places by

the way—I said, Mr. President, do you have a drug problem? No, no. no. We do not. I said, Huh, big country. 1.4 billion people, right? Not much of a drug problem. I said, What do you attribute that to? Well, the death penalty. It’s true.” He went on to say, “They don’t play games. I said, How you doing on drugs? No problem. Said, What do you mean no problem? And that’s entertainment. You know, a lot of things are happening. So what do you mean no problem? We have a zero-tolerance policy. What does that mean? That means if we catch a drug dealer, death penalty, that’s it. And they don’t have a problem.” He argued at some length that drugs can kill people, therefore drug dealers should be treated as murderers. Trump had previously congratulated Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte for his “unbelievable job on the drug problem,” calling him a “good man” and inviting him to the White House “anytime you want to come.” Duterte has killed thousands without trial (users and dealers alike) in his war on drugs, publicly calling himself the “Hitler” of the Philippines because he would be “happy to slaughter” millions of “drug addicts.”

**Trump has referred to political opponents as “human scum.”** He has used the phrase multiple times. For example, in October 2019, he denounced members of his own party who have questioned his leadership: “The Never Trumper Republicans, though on respirators with not many left, are in certain ways worse and more dangerous for our Country than the Do Nothing Democrats. Watch out for them, they are human scum!” In May 2020, he lashed out at Obama and the Justice Department for investigating Michael Flynn. (The Justice Department had recently dropped charges against Flynn, although he admitted to lying to the FBI during their investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election.) Trump said that Flynn “was targeted by the Obama administration and he was targeted in order to try and take down a President and what they have done is a disgrace and I hope a big price is going to be paid, a big price should be paid. There has never been anything like this in the history of our country. What they did, what the Obama administration did is unprecedented. It has never happened, never happened. A thing like this has never happened before in the history of our country and I hope a lot of people are going to pay a big price because they are dishonest, crooked people. They are scum and I say it a lot, they are scum, they are human scum.”

The year before, he had even accused Democrats of treason for not clapping during his State of the Union speech: “Un-American. Somebody said, treasonous. I mean, Yeah, I guess why not? Can we call that treason? Why not? I mean they certainly didn’t seem to love our country that much.” The same man who said that he would only accept the outcome of an election if he won, and that he would consider it fraudulent otherwise, referred to the decision not to clap for him as treasonous. Those are the words of a man who stands fundamentally opposed to democracy itself.

## **Bigotry**

Perhaps the most prominent feature of Trump’s persona as a politician is his willingness to give voice to the idea that White, American, and Christian people are superior to other kinds of people. In this section, I provide examples of his bigotry.

### **Muslim Ban**

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump promised to ban Muslims from entering the United States. In December 2015, his campaign released an official statement stating that “Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on.” The title of the

statement was “Donald J. Trump Statement on Preventing Muslim Immigration.” Trump argued that Muslims hate America, and linked his antipathy toward them to his campaign slogan “Make America Great Again.” He said, “Without looking at the various polling data, it is obvious to anybody the hatred is beyond comprehension. Where this hatred comes from and why we will have to determine. Until we are able to determine and understand this problem and the dangerous threat it poses, our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad, and have no sense of reason or respect for human life. If I win the election for President, we are going to Make America Great Again.”

When questioned about his promise, Trump stated that he saw his policy as “the same thing” as the infamous internment of Japanese Americans during World War 2, and reiterated that he was putting forth an explicit religious test for entry to the US. He said that the customs screening process would be simple: “they would say, are you Muslim?” The reporter he was speaking to clarified, “And if they said yes, they would not be allowed into the country.” Trump responded, “That’s correct.”

The Constitution states that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States” and that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This fact is notable because it demonstrates the absurd lengths to which Trump is willing to go to voice his abject bigotry. Prejudice against Muslims has been a major problem in United States politics for most of my lifetime, but Trump crossed lines that many other high-profile bigots were not willing to cross.

In September 2015, Trump mentioned Syrian refugees slated to enter the country the following year, stating “if I win, they’re going back.” When asked in a January 2016 debate to “rethink” his position about “banning Muslims from entering the country,” he said “No.” In March, he told an interviewer that “Islam hates us.” He reiterated these sentiments, and his plan to ban Muslims from entering the US, several more times.

Peter, I implore you to consider for a moment what it must have felt like to be a Muslim living in the United States in 2016 and learn that your fellow Americans had elected a leader who had so explicitly indicated that your entire religious group was not welcome in the country. This message has done long-lasting damage to the US’s international reputation and added obstacles to creating an equitable society at home.

One week after taking office, he issued an executive order entitled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.” When he signed it, he said, “We all know what that means.” Many believed that he was referring to his campaign promise to ban Muslims from entering the US. Indeed, the executive order halted entry to the United States by citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen—all majority-Muslim countries. Trump described the order as “a new vetting measure to keep radical Islamic terrorists out of the United States of America.”

Within a week, the executive order was blocked by the courts on the grounds that its justification was unconstitutional. Echoing his typical disrespect for any checks on his authority, Trump wrote, “The opinion of this so-called judge, which essentially takes law-enforcement away from our country, is ridiculous and will be overturned!” His Justice Department also claimed that he had “unreviewable authority” to stop any group of people from entering the country.

Trump also spread falsehoods related to his proposed Muslim ban. In February 2017, he posted a claim on social media that Kuwait was implementing a travel ban similar to his; the

Assistant Foreign Minister of Kuwait confirmed that the claim was false. In October 2017, he posted another claim, “Just out report: ‘United Kingdom crime rises 13 percent annually amid spread of Radical Islamic terror.’ not good, we must keep America safe!” The report in question did show an increase in crime in the UK, but did not have to do with Muslim terrorists. Early in his presidential campaign, Trump also spread an unsubstantiated rumor that “thousands and thousands” of Arab and/or Muslim Americans in Jersey City had celebrated the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, saying, “There were people that were cheering on the other side of New Jersey, where you have large Arab populations. They were cheering as the World Trade Center came down.” I will return to Trump’s habitual disregard for the truth in the next major section.

### **Examples of Racial and Ethnic Animus**

In addition to his “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” Trump has built his political career on denigration of Mexicans and other ethnic, racial, and national groups.

**Trump said that the Mexican government intentionally sends “rapists” to the US.** In the June 2015 speech announcing his run for president, Trump said, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re sending people that have lots of problems. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” He later clarified his opinion about Mexican immigrants, “Our leaders are stupid, our politicians are stupid, and the Mexican government is much smarter, much sharper, much more cunning, and they send the bad ones over because they don’t want to pay for them, they don’t want to take care of them. Why should they, when the stupid leaders of the United States will do it for them? And that’s what’s happening, whether you like it or not.” He has continued to frame his stance on immigration (particularly undocumented immigration) by blaming the Mexican government and emphasizing ethnic animosity. In one presidential debate, he said “we have some bad hombres here and we’re going to get them out,” attempting to use the Spanish word for “men” to make his point. (He mispronounced it as “hambres” rather than “hombres.”)

**Trump campaigned on an implausible promise to make Mexico pay for a border wall.** In the June 2015 speech announcing his campaign, he said, “I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will have Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words.” This became a constant refrain of his campaign. “Build the wall” was a common chant at Trump rallies, like “Lock her up” (mentioned above). The idea that Mexico (or the Mexican government) would pay for the wall was part of the message from the beginning, including call-and-response style chants in which Trump would ask, “who’s going to pay for the wall?” and his supporters would shout “Mexico!”

Trump typically left it vague exactly how Mexico would pay, but in April 2016 he said, “They may even write us a check by the time they see what happens.” In 2015 he said, “a politician cannot get them to pay. I can,” and made reference to his ghostwritten book, “The Art of the Deal,” to imply that he would use a unique kind of dealmaking skill to achieve the desired outcome. The US-Mexico border is nearly two thousand miles long. About a third of that distance had fences before Trump took office, and that remains true today, although Trump did upgrade many of them.

Details of Trump’s border wall policies are beyond the scope of this letter, but the gist of the promise provides necessary context. In particular, his promise to build a wall and make Mexico pay for it was, taken literally, beyond what he could conceivably accomplish, which suggests that the point was not to describe a concrete plan but rather to give the appearance of taking a hardline stance on Mexican immigration.

**Trump attacked a judge for being Mexican American.** Earlier, I alluded to Trump's fraudulent "university," one of his many questionable businesses prior to becoming president. A fraud suit against Trump related to Trump University was still ongoing during the 2016 presidential campaign, presided over by Judge Gonzalo P. Curiel. In May 2016, Trump railed against Curiel for his Mexican heritage. "Let me just tell you, I've had horrible rulings, I've been treated very unfairly by this judge. Now, this judge is of Mexican heritage. I'm building a wall, OK? I'm building a wall." When asked, "So, no Mexican judge could ever be involved in a case that involves you?" Trump responded, "Well, he's a member of a society, where—you know, very pro-Mexico, and that's fine. It's all fine, but"—at which point, the interviewer said, "Except that you're calling into question his heritage," and Trump continued, "I think he should recuse himself." When pressed, Trump denied that he is racist but said, "We are building a wall. He's a Mexican. We're building a wall between here and Mexico." When the interviewer pointed out the fact that Curiel was born in Indiana and not Mexico, Trump replied, "He's of Mexican heritage and he's very proud of it." It is worth emphasizing at this point that Trump's explanation for the perceived conflict of interest rests on the idea that his border wall campaign promise was, in his mind, a stance against people of Mexican heritage generally.

**Trump pardoned Joe Arpaio for continuing racial profiling in violation of a court order.** Former Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio is notable for his staunch defense of racial profiling. After he was ordered in court to stop selectively targeting Latin Americans, he announced that he would continue to do so anyway, in open defiance of the court. In August 2017, Arpaio was convicted of criminal contempt of court, and Trump swiftly pardoned him.

**Trump repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as "the China virus."** Starting in March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to spread throughout the United States, Trump went out of his way to name the disease after China. During his March 19th press briefing, a journalist captured a photograph of his notes, on which he had crossed out the "corona" in "coronavirus" and written "Chinese" in its place. Trump was explicitly warned that this language could exacerbate xenophobia and anti-Asian sentiment, but he ignored these warnings. Over the past six months, he has routinely referred to COVID-19 as "China virus" or "Chinese virus." Several times he even called it "Kung flu." In the first 2020 presidential debate, he referred to it as "the China plague."

Economic strain, social upheaval, and deadly pathogens tend to heighten xenophobia. Referring to the pathogens themselves using the name of an ethnic group or nationality is aggressively dangerous. It fans the flames of bigotry.

**Trump has used derisive language to describe African, Central American, and Caribbean nations.** In a January 2018 meeting with members of Congress, Trump questioned the value of immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador, and African countries, asking, "Why do we want all these people from shithole countries coming here?" Although there is no known recording of the meeting, the administration did not deny that Trump said the word "shithole" in this context. He also indicated a desire for more immigrants from Norway, a White-majority nation, in contrast to the countries he described as shitholes. In an earlier meeting, Trump was quoted as saying that Haitian immigrants "all have AIDS" and Nigerian immigrants would not want to "go back to their huts." (These quotations are disputed. Some people present at that meeting denied that Trump used the specific words "AIDS" and "huts" but did not deny the overall sentiment. Others specifically remembered commenting on the words "AIDS" and "huts" because they were so provocative.)

**Trump unapologetically promoted a hardline immigration policy that separated children from families.** Starting in 2018, the Trump administration implemented a “zero-tolerance policy” for people, most of whom were Latin American, who crossed the border without the proper paperwork. As a result of this policy, thousands of children were separated from their families and held in government custody so that their guardians could be jailed. So many children were separated in this way that holding pens became overcrowded and authorities managed to lose track of some records of which children belonged with which guardians. Reports emerged of children being taken away from parents without either party being informed of how or when they could meet again. Recordings surfaced of terrified children wailing.

Trump has claimed that “we had the exact same policy as the Obama Administration,” but both Obama and Bush avoided prosecuting parents as a matter of policy, in order to prevent this exact issue. Trump’s “zero-tolerance policy” radically changed that state of affairs, making family separation the standard approach rather than a measure used in extreme circumstances. After overwhelming public pressure, including from Republicans, Trump walked back the “zero-tolerance” family separation policy, at the same time implying that he was fixing a problem created by Obama.

In October, Trump said, “Every single Democrat in the U.S. Senate has signed up for the open borders, and it’s a bill, it’s called the open borders bill.” The bill in question was actually called the “Keep Families Together Act” and it would not have opened the border, only scaled back the authority to separate children from their parents.

Trump likely implemented the “zero-tolerance policy” in the first place to appear as tough as possible on immigration, and he stuck to his guns for months even after seeing the consequences and hearing the outcry. Tearing innocent children away from their families to make a political point is not just cruel—it is something that would happen in a children’s movie to make it as easy as possible to identify the villain.

**Trump has proposed overturning the Constitutional guarantee of birthright citizenship.** In an October 2018 interview, Trump said, “you can definitely do it with an act of Congress. But, now they’re saying I can do it just with an executive order. Now, how ridiculous—we’re the only country in the world where a person comes in, has a baby and the baby is essentially a citizen of the United States for 85 years, with all of those benefits. It’s ridiculous. It’s ridiculous. And it has to end.” The Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution states, “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.” There is no legal mechanism to amend the constitution via unilateral presidential decree. Also, it is false that birthright citizenship is unique to the US; dozens of other countries have the same policy, including our neighbors Canada and Mexico.

He brought up the idea again in August 2019, saying “We’re looking at that very seriously—birthright citizenship, where you have a baby on our land, you walk over the border, have a baby—congratulations, the baby is now a US citizen.” He repeated, “We are looking at birthright citizenship very seriously—it’s frankly ridiculous.”

In January 2020, perhaps realizing that amending the Constitution would be challenging, Trump announced a policy stating that a consular officer who “has reason to believe” that a prospective tourist will give birth during a visit to the US should deny the tourist visa.

**Trump has employed racist rhetoric to smear lawmakers he disagrees with.** In July 2019, he wrote a social media post about four members of the US House of Representatives, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib: “So interesting to



see ‘Progressive’ Democrat Congresswomen, who originally came from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe, the worst, most corrupt and inept anywhere in the world (if they even have a functioning government at all), now loudly and viciously telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth, how our government is to be run. Why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came.” In fact, three of the four women in question were born in the United States—but all four women are members of minority racial or ethnic groups. It is apparent that Trump views them as not truly American, at least in part because of their ancestry.

In an exceedingly rare move, the House of Representatives passed a resolution denouncing Trump’s posts as “racist comments that have legitimized increased fear and hatred of new Americans and people of color.” Trump’s response was to claim, “I don’t have a Racist bone in my body!” and suggest that the House instead have “a vote on the filthy language, statements and lies told by the Democrat Congresswomen, who I truly believe, based on their actions, hate our Country.” The next day at a rally, Trump again criticized the same four women. He made fun of Ocasio-Cortez’s name, calling her “Cortez,” “They said that’s not her name, sir. I said, No, no. I don’t have time to go with three different names. We’ll call her Cortez. Too much time—takes too much time.” He also encouraged the crowd to boo each of the four in turn, and chant “Send her back” about Omar, a US citizen who was born in Somalia. Later that month, he told a group of high school students that Ocasio-Cortez “called our country and our people garbage.” (She had actually described economic circumstances for the working class as “garbage.”)

The same month, Trump lashed out at Elijah Cummings, a Black member of the House of Representatives. Trump wrote, “Rep, Elijah Cummings has been a brutal bully, shouting and screaming at the great men & women of Border Patrol about conditions at the Southern Border, when actually his Baltimore district is FAR WORSE and more dangerous.” He continued, “Cummings District is a disgusting, rat and rodent infested mess. If he spent more time in Baltimore, maybe he could help clean up this very dangerous & filthy place.” He also wrote, “Why is so much money sent to the Elijah Cummings district when it is considered the worst run and most dangerous anywhere in the United States. No human being would want to live there. Where is all this money going? How much is stolen? Investigate this corrupt mess immediately!” Baseless accusations of theft and exaggerated imagery of dirty and dangerous urban scenery resonate with anti-Black racial stereotypes currently common in the US.

The previous year, Trump referred to Maxine Waters, another Black member of the House of Representatives, as a “very low IQ individual” (in March) and “an extraordinarily low IQ person” (in June). Trump has accused many of his opponents of having low IQs, but his comments about Waters specifically risk reinforcing the stereotype that Black people have lower intrinsic intelligence than White people, and evoke the long history of using IQ testing to rationalize that stereotype. In August 2018, Trump referred to Omarosa Manigault Newman, another Black woman and his own former staffer, as a “lowlife” and a “dog” in retaliation for her criticizing his administration. Newman had been the 2016 Trump campaign’s director of African-American outreach. And as I was writing this letter, he called vice presidential candidate Kamala Harris “this monster that was onstage with Mike Pence,” referring to the televised vice presidential debate.

### **Promotion, Legitimation, and Defense of White Supremacist Groups**

It should come as no surprise at this point to learn that Trump is popular among White supremacist groups, including Nazi and Ku Klux Klan groups. David Duke, a former Klan leader

and the most famous Klan affiliate alive today, stated during the 2016 campaign that “Trump is waking up our people and energizing our people across America.” Later, in response to Trump’s “shithole countries” comment, Duke wrote that Trump says “blunt but truthful things that no other President in our lifetime would dare say! NO DACA! NO COMPROMISE - NO Sh\*\*thole America! Hail Trump!” (DACA is a policy that makes it possible for some undocumented immigrants who were brought to the US as children to obtain work permits.)

Trump has also received praise from *The Daily Stormer*, a neo-Nazi website named after the World War II era German newspaper *Der Stürmer* that frequently called for the extermination of all Jews. *The Daily Stormer* referred to Trump’s 2018 State of the Union address as “encouraging and refreshing,” stating, “Trump is more or less on the same page as us with regards to race and immigration,” and “I think it is clear that Trump’s ideal America is the one he grew up with in the 1950s. And the closer we get to that, the closer we are to our own goals of a white race-state.”

Trump has taken several steps to encourage this kind of allegiance, including appointing White supremacists and White supremacist sympathizers to positions in his administration, sharing content from White supremacist sources on social media, and making oblique White supremacist statements coupled with tepid denials.

**Trump has appointed White supremacist ideologues and sympathizers to government positions.** For example, he appointed Steve Bannon, former executive chair of Breitbart News, to serve as chief executive of his 2016 presidential campaign and later as a senior advisor in the White House. Breitbart has a history of publishing anti-Black, anti-Muslim, and other derogatory stories, although its current owners claim that it is not a White supremacist website. Bannon described the site as a “platform for the alt-right.” (“Alt-right” is a term commonly used to describe online instantiations of White supremacist ideas that eschew the literal phrase “White supremacy.”) Bannon has more recently instructed his supporters to “Let them call you racist, let them call you xenophobes, let them call you nativists. Wear it as a badge of honor. Because every day, we get stronger and they get weaker.” Trump also appointed Stephen Miller to be one of his senior advisors and to help write some of his speeches. In the years leading up to Miller’s appointment to the Trump campaign, he carried on a lengthy email exchange with a Breitbart News reporter in which he encouraged her to cover stories from more explicitly White supremacist websites such as *American Renaissance* and *VDARE*.

In 2016, the Trump campaign named William Johnson as one of Trump’s pledged delegates from California to the Republican National Convention. Johnson is the chair of the American Freedom Party, which officially describes itself as “A Nationalist party that shares the customs and heritage of the European American people,” and Johnson has stated that he hopes to make the US a “White ethno-state.” After the news broke, the Trump campaign claimed that Johnson’s name was included on the list by mistake.

Trump nominated Jeff Sessions to serve as his first Attorney General. Sessions is a well-known opponent of several civil rights laws who once said on the Senate floor that “almost no one coming from the Dominican Republic to the United States is coming here because they have a provable skill that would benefit us and that would indicate their likely success in our society.” He had been nominated to a federal judge position in 1986, and this nomination failed in the Senate Judiciary Committee due to testimony about Sessions’ history of racially biased statements.

In August 2017, Trump nominated Sam Clovis, a man who has referred to progressives as “race traitors,” to be Under Secretary of Agriculture for Research, Education, and Economics. Clovis later withdrew himself from consideration for the position for unrelated reasons.

In January 2018, Trump appointee Carl Higbie resigned from his position at the Corporation for National and Community Service because CNN discovered comments he had previously made on his radio program. He had attributed “the high percentage of people on welfare in the black race” to “a lax of morality,” said, “I just don’t like Muslim people,” and instructed Muslims to “Go back to your Muslim shithole and go crap in your hands and bang little boys on Thursday nights.”

In March 2018, Trump nominated William G. Otis to the United States Sentencing Commission. Otis once wrote, “when Fifth Circuit Judge Edith Jones said at a University of Pennsylvania Law School talk that blacks and Hispanics are more violent than whites, a consortium of civil rights organizations filed a complaint. The complaint calls for stern discipline, on the grounds that the remarks were ‘discriminatory and biased.’ So far as I have been able to discover, it makes no mention of the fact that they’re true.” The Senate let the nomination expire.

**Trump uses rhetoric that appeals to White supremacists.** I listed many examples of Trump’s prejudicial language above. Here, I will mention a few more that employ specific words and symbols that appeal to White supremacists while striving to maintain plausible deniability. For example, his derisive language about undocumented immigrants has borrowed from White supremacist talking points. In April 2018, he wrote, “There is a Revolution going on in California. Soooo many Sanctuary areas want OUT of this ridiculous, crime infested & breeding concept.” His use of the word “breeding” was ambiguous, but some interpreted it as an allusion to the idea that immigrants “breed” like animals.

Over the past few years, there have been increasing efforts to remove public monuments honoring the Confederate States of America. Trump has denounced these efforts. For example, in August 2017 he wrote, “Sad to see the history and culture of our great country being ripped apart with the removal of our beautiful statues and monuments.” The CSA rebelled from the United States in an effort to preserve their power to enslave Black people. The idea that efforts to fight racism are tantamount to erasing history have become a staple of Trump’s speeches. In 2020, in a speech at Mount Rushmore, he said, “Our nation is witnessing a merciless campaign to wipe out our history, defame our heroes, erase our values, and indoctrinate our children. Angry mobs are trying to tear down statues of our Founders, deface our most sacred memorials, and unleash a wave of violent crime in our cities. Many of these people have no idea why they are doing this, but some know exactly what they are doing. They think the American people are weak and soft and submissive. But no, the American people are strong and proud, and they will not allow our country, and all of its values, history, and culture, to be taken from them.” He has also used this context to paint himself as the sole savior of America. In August, he said, “The more success that we’ve achieved, the more unhinged the radical left has become. Anarchists and violent mobs have rioted in our Democrat-run cities, attacking police and tearing down statues. I’m the only thing standing between the American dream and total anarchy, madness, and chaos, and that’s what it is.”

In May 2020, Trump stated that Henry Ford had “good bloodlines.” Ford famously published “The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem” and other anti-Semitic tracts, and the concept of the genetic superiority of non-Jewish White people’s “bloodlines” has historically been a key part of antisemitic and racist ideologies. Later, at a rally in Minnesota,

Trump told the crowd, “You have good genes, you know that, right? You have good genes. A lot of it’s about the genes, isn’t it, don’t you believe? The racehorse theory, you think we’re so different? You have good genes in Minnesota.” The “racehorse theory” appears to be a reference to the concept of selective breeding for genetic superiority. Trump has mentioned racehorses in this context before, explaining in 2010 that “when you connect two racehorses, you usually end up with a fast horse.”

Later in May, while Trump was beginning his threats to send an “occupying force” to “dominate the streets” in “Democrat-run cities” (recall the Authoritarianism section of this letter), he wrote “Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank you!” Trump borrowed the rhyme “when the looting starts, the shooting starts” verbatim from defenders of police brutality and opponents of civil rights during the 1960s. He later said of the rhyme, “I don’t know where it came from or where it originated.” (After invoking specific phrases historically associated with White supremacy, Trump typically claims not to know their origins, to have stumbled upon them by coincidence.) Trump also repeated his by now well-worn characterization of anti-racism protesters as “thugs.”

In June 2020, the Trump re-election campaign posted advertisements on Facebook that decried anti-racism protesters as “dangerous MOBS” and paired this language with an image of a large red equilateral triangle with one of its points facing downward. Nazi concentration camps used this same downward-pointing red triangle to identify political prisoners. Facebook officials removed the advertisements because the use of the symbol violated the site’s terms and conditions. The Trump campaign’s Twitter account described the triangle as “an emoji” without giving any explanation for its use in the advertisements except for the implausible claim that it is “widely used by Antifa.” (Antifa, short for anti-fascist, is a term that has been used recently by several groups opposed to Trump.)

**Trump shares White supremacist content on social media.** As I expect will still be the case when you grow up, most social media platforms currently permit users to share content originally posted by other users, passing it along to their own audience. Trump routinely uses this feature, giving certain posts much greater exposure than they otherwise would have.

In November 2015, he shared an image that included several incorrect statistics about crime in the US, including “WHITES KILLED BY BLACKS ~ 81%.” (That year, 82% of White murder victims in the FBI database were actually killed by White perpetrators.) The idea that Black people frequently commit murder is a common talking point among White supremacists. Trump’s decision to share this image was widely criticized, including by the well-known conservative commentator Bill O’Reilly, to whom Trump replied, “Am I gonna check every statistic?”

In July 2016, Trump shared an image of Hillary Clinton’s face, surrounded by money and next to a solid red six-pointed star with white text on it reading “Most Corrupt Candidate Ever!” Six-pointed stars are commonly used to designate Judaism and Jewish people, including by online White supremacist conspiracy theorists who routinely claim that major political figures are controlled by a fictional international Jewish cabal. Trump later wrote, “Dishonest media is trying their absolute best to depict a star in a tweet as the Star of David rather than a Sheriff’s Star, or plain star!” It is worth emphasizing that Trump typically claims to be unaware of the sources of materials he shares online, especially when those sources turn out to be deeply racist. If he was actually concerned about “accidentally” sharing White supremacist materials, however, one would think that he would do it less often and less blatantly. Twice in 2016 Trump shared

Twitter posts authored by an account called “WhiteGenocideTM,” which as the name implies, is unapologetically racist. (“White genocide” is a phrase used by White supremacists to denigrate racial diversity.) Account names are plainly visible next to all posts on Twitter. Trump also once shared posts authored by an account with swastikas visible on its page, and repeatedly shared posts authored by another account with “#WhiteGenocide is real” in its description. These were not isolated events. Trump’s social media use is notoriously reckless, hasty, and revealing.

In November 2017, Trump shared three videos posted on Twitter by Jayda Fransen casting Muslims as a violent threat. Fransen was the deputy leader of Britain First, a self-described “nationalist” group in Britain that vehemently denigrates Islam and has been described by several mainstream British newspapers as a “fascist” organization. One of the videos Trump shared was labeled “Muslim migrant beats up Dutch boy on crutches,” but the perpetrator in the video was not actually a Muslim migrant.

In August 2019, Trump shared a video created by some of his supporters promoting his presidential election campaign. The video ended with a logo of a stylized lion’s head above Trump’s name and campaign slogan, “Keep America great.” Trump may not have been aware that the lion logo in question was created in 2016 by a White supremacist Trump supporter on Twitter. In February 2016, Trump had shared a post authored by a joke Twitter account that attributed the statement “It is better to live one day as a lion than 100 years as a sheep” to Trump himself. It was actually Benito Mussolini, fascist leader of Italy during World War II and Hitler’s most famous ally, who said that. When confronted about it, Trump had said “It’s a very good quote” and “what difference does it make whether it’s Mussolini or somebody else? It’s certainly a very interesting quote.”

In June 2020, Trump shared a video of an argument at a Florida retirement community in which someone asked a man with a Trump sign on his golf cart, “Where’s your white hood?” and the Trump supporter replied, “White power! White power!” In his post, Trump thanked the “great people” of the retirement community for their support and did not comment on the “White power” slogan. He deleted the post three hours later. His administration claimed that he had not heard the “White power” part of the video.

In August 2020, Trump shared a video of a Black man violently pushing a White woman, carrying over the label “Black Lives Matter / Antifa” added by the account that posted the video. The scene in question had taken place a year earlier and had nothing to do with anti-racism or anti-Trump protests.

**Trump is quick to praise and slow to denounce White supremacist groups.** In August 2017, an explicitly White supremacist rally with the tagline “Unite the Right” took place in Charlottesville, VA. Attendees and organizers included members of Nazi and Ku Klux Klan groups, and former Klan leader David Duke told reporters before the event that they were “going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump.” At the event, people marched down the street with torches, swastikas, and Confederate flags, shouting slogans including “Jews will not replace us,” and one White supremacist intentionally accelerated his car into a crowd of protesters, killing one and injuring nineteen. Trump’s initial response to the event was to condemn violence generally without mentioning White supremacy, saying, “We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides, on many sides.” Republicans and Democrats alike called upon Trump to explicitly name the violence perpetrated by White supremacists. In an official statement, he did so: “Racism is evil. And those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs, including the KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other hate groups that are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans.” But in a

press conference the next day, he defended the “Unite the Right” marchers, saying, “I’ve condemned neo-Nazis. I’ve condemned many different groups. But not all of those people were neo-Nazis, believe me,” going on to say that “The press has treated them absolutely unfairly,” and “You also had some very fine people on both sides.”

The Charlottesville rally received substantial media attention, but it was not the first time Trump avoided confronting direct questions about the fact that White supremacists support him so enthusiastically. David Duke, the former Klan leader mentioned above, endorsed Trump’s presidential run in 2016. When paired with Trump’s already clear propensity for racist rhetoric (e.g., calling Mexican immigrants “rapists” in his campaign announcement speech), this endorsement was concerning to many journalists. One such journalist, Jake Tapper, asked Trump directly, “I want to ask you about the Anti-Defamation League, which this week called on you to publicly condemn unequivocally the racism of former KKK grand wizard David Duke, who recently said that voting against you at this point would be treason to your heritage. Will you unequivocally condemn David Duke and say that you don’t want his vote or that of other white supremacists in this election?” Trump responded, “Well, just so you understand, I don’t know anything about David Duke. OK? I don’t know anything about what you’re even talking about with white supremacy or white supremacists. So, I don’t know.” Tapper repeatedly reminded Trump that Duke is affiliated with the Klan, and Trump repeatedly responded by claiming he would withhold judgment. At one point in the ensuing crosstalk, Tapper said, “The Ku Klux Klan?” and Trump’s next sentence was, “But you may have groups in there that are totally fine.” While the context suggests that Trump was not specifically referring to the Klan as “totally fine,” he did not take the opportunity to further clarify his stance on the Klan.

It is also worth pointing out at this point that Trump was lying when he claimed not to know anything about David Duke. He had been aware of Duke for decades. In an interview in 1991, Trump compared Duke’s ideology to Pat Buchanan’s, saying, “Whether that be good or bad, David Duke is going to get a lot of votes. Pat Buchanan—who really has many of the same theories, except it’s in a better package—Pat Buchanan is going to take a lot of votes away from George Bush.” In another interview in 2000 about the Reform Party, Trump said, “Well, you’ve got David Duke just joined—a bigot, a racist, a problem. I mean, this is not exactly the people you want in your party.” Trump seems to have become reluctant to publicly acknowledge Duke’s bigotry around the time that Duke first endorsed him for president. Duke has endorsed Trump again in 2020.

In the September 2020 presidential debate, Trump was again directly asked if he would denounce White supremacist groups, and again he equivocated. At one point in his confusing rant, he blurted out, “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by.” The Proud Boys are a White supremacist and male supremacist organization that participated in the Charlottesville “Unite the Right” rally mentioned above. (The Proud Boys refer to their ideology as “Western chauvinism” and claim that this distinguishes it from “White supremacy” because they focus on the superiority of European culture rather than the superiority of European racial ancestry. Both claims to superiority are clear forms of White supremacy.) The Proud Boys routinely participate in violence in the service of their ideals. One of their founders once said, “I’m disappointed in Trump supporters for not punching enough.” Earlier in this letter, I mentioned that Trump once referred to people who fired paintball guns at anti-racism protesters as “peaceful”—at least one of those paintball shooters was a member of the Proud Boys. Trump’s instruction, “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by,” uttered on live television in front of tens of millions of viewers, was a rallying cry for the group. Dictionary.com defines “stand by” as “be available and ready to act if

needed or called upon.” Members of the Proud Boys quickly adopted “stand back and stand by” as a slogan of sorts on social media.

Three days later, Trump said “I’ve said it many times, but let me be clear again: I condemn the KKK. I condemn all white supremacists. I condemn the Proud Boys.” Peter, I hope this pattern is becoming clear. After Trump appears to endorse White supremacists, or to dodge questions about their support for him, he is frequently subject to intense criticism for a few days, after which he issues a prepared statement denouncing White supremacy. If challenging White supremacy was a priority for him, his pattern of behavior would be different. His hesitation sends White supremacist groups a powerful signal. The Proud Boys did not drop “stand back and stand by” simply because Trump later condemned them.

Trump’s tendency to praise, equivocate, *and* condemn, in turns, is useful for him. Some of his most ardent supporters are people who admire that he “speaks his mind” without concerns for “political correctness” but who do not consider themselves White supremacists and do not care to state explicitly that White people are superior. They enjoy having their prejudices validated as long as they can still feel morally superior to the more hardcore bigots. They believe that “the media” unfairly labels Trump a bigot and point to his occasional condemnation of White supremacists as evidence. I hope that I have made clear in this section that Trump’s sometimes confusing comments about his White supremacist supporters are just part of the story about him—they reinforce his public persona and maintain his connections to bigots while enabling him to stop short of holding up a swastika or putting on a white hood himself.

### **Antipathy for Truth**

Many political leaders have ignored evidence when making decisions, but most of them at least pretend to care about evidence when they communicate with the public. One of Trump’s most dangerous achievements has been making it seem normal for a leader to explicitly deny the value of evidence, facts, information—to disavow even the basic process of trying to evaluate whether claims are true. He has promoted a culture of deliberate ignorance and antipathy to truth-seeking through his transparent and relentless lies and his attempts to suppress the press, protest, and any criticism of himself.

### **Lies, Big and Small**

It is a truism that politicians lie, but Trump lies relentlessly. I have already mentioned several examples, including his baseless voter fraud claims. I will now list more, but I cannot possibly be comprehensive. He seems to spend his life saying anything that comes to mind that might feed his ego. His rhetorical approach is geared to overwhelm journalists and fact checkers.

Immediately after taking office, he directed his press secretary, Sean Spicer, to lie about the size of the crowd at his inauguration, and he and his staff continued to insist that their take was accurate even in the face of photographs plainly showing a crowd smaller than the one at Barack Obama’s inauguration. Spicer stated that the crowd was “the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe.” When the inaccuracy was pointed out, Trump’s counselor Kellyanne Conway claimed that the administration had “alternative facts” that justified the claim. Trump called into question the legitimacy of press photos of the event, and then his administration released photos from the National Park Service that were strategically cropped to make the crowd appear larger. This is a petty issue, but one that illustrates just how little it takes for this president to ask people to ignore the truth.

He has also had framed images hung in his resorts depicting an apparent *Time* magazine cover saying “TRUMP IS HITTING ON ALL FRONTS...EVEN ON TV!” No such cover was ever published by *Time*. He implausibly claimed in 2017 that *Time* had called him to ask him to agree to an interview so they could name him “Man (Person) of the Year” for the second year in a row. In July 2017, after he gave a speech at a Boy Scout event, Trump claimed that he “got a call from the head of the Boy Scouts saying it was the greatest speech that was ever made to them,” a phone call which his press secretary was later forced to admit never happened.

In February 2017, Trump said, “And yet the murder rate in our country is the highest it’s been in 47 years, right? Did you know that? Forty-seven years.” The national murder rate had gone up recently, but was still much lower than it had been in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

In March 2017, Trump wrote a series of social media posts accusing Barack Obama of wiretapping his New York City skyscraper. He wrote, “Just found out that Obama had my ‘wires tapped’ in Trump Tower just before the victory,” and “How low has President Obama gone to tapp my phones during the very sacred election process.” This accusation was and is completely unsubstantiated, according to both the FBI and the Department of Justice, and Trump supplied no justification for the false claim. He continued to repeat the claim itself, though, including in a May interview on CBS. When pressed, he provided no details but said, “I don’t stand by anything. I just—you can take it the way you want. I think our side’s been proven very strongly,” and “I have my own opinions. You can have your own opinions,” after which he terminated the interview.

In April 2017, in response to polls showing an extremely low approval rating, Trump wrote a social media post stating that “New polls out today are very good considering that much of the media is FAKE and almost always negative. Would still beat Hillary in popular vote.” Contrary to his implication, he lost the popular vote in 2016.

Dozens of times, Trump has said that the US has the “highest taxes in the world,” (e.g., October 2015, February 2016, May 2016, July 2017, October 2017). In fact, total taxes and most specific kinds of taxes (e.g., personal income taxes) are lower in the US than in other developed countries, and certainly not the highest in the world.

In October 2017, Trump was talking about personally calling the families of US troops killed on duty, and said, “If you look at President Obama and other presidents, most of them didn’t make calls. I like to call when it’s appropriate.” Obama did make those phone calls. When questioned further, Trump weakened his stance, saying, “Obama I think probably did sometimes and maybe sometimes he didn’t.”

In Missouri in November 2017, Trump said, “Thirteen states this year have seen unemployment drop to the lowest levels in the history of their state. And I hate to tell you, but Missouri happens to be one of them.” Missouri did not have record low unemployment at the time. In December, he said “Black homeownership just hit the highest level it has ever been in the history of our country.” In fact, Black homeownership had fallen since 2004.

At the end of 2017, Trump said, “we have signed more legislation than anybody—we broke the record of Harry Truman,” and “We have more legislation passed, including—the record was Harry Truman. That’s a long time ago. And we broke that record.” Trump had in fact signed fewer bills during his first year in office than any president in at least 60 years. He may have been thinking of the fact that he signed more bills into law during his first hundred days than any president *since* Harry Truman, but even focusing on a hundred day timeframe, both Truman and Franklin Roosevelt signed more than Trump.



In July 2018, Trump wrote, “Wow, highest Poll Numbers in the history of the Republican Party. That includes Honest Abe Lincoln and Ronald Reagan. There must be something wrong, please recheck that poll!” Earlier that month he had claimed that polls showed he was “the most popular person in the history of the Republican Party.” One does not have to look very far into history to find higher poll numbers: the previous Republican president, George W. Bush, was rated more favorably within his party. Polling was not a systematic practice in Lincoln’s time.

That same month, Trump said, “U.S. Steel just announced that they are building six new steel mills.” He repeated this claim several times on various days. U.S. Steel did have a plan to restart two furnaces at a single plant, both of which had been shut down in 2015, but they had no plans to build any new steel mills.

In August 2018, Trump wrote a social media post fabricating a connection between environmental policy and firefighting. He wrote, “California wildfires are being magnified & made so much worse by the bad environmental laws which aren’t allowing massive amount of readily available water to be properly utilized. It is being diverted into the Pacific Ocean.” Environmental laws did not restrict use of water for fighting fires, and a spokesperson for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection reiterated that they “had no issues accessing water to fight the fires.”

In September 2018, Trump denied thousands of deaths caused by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in Puerto Rico. He wrote, “3000 people did not die in the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico. When I left the Island, AFTER the storm had hit, they had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths. As time went by it did not go up by much. Then, a long time later, they started to report really large numbers, like 3000. This was done by the Democrats in order to make me look as bad as possible when I was successfully raising Billions of Dollars to help rebuild Puerto Rico. If a person died for any reason, like old age, just add them onto the list.” The government of Puerto Rico initially counted mere dozens of deaths, but those numbers reflected only deaths officially recorded by medical examiners at the time. Subsequent studies aimed to determine how many people died during the hurricane who would otherwise have lived. These estimates are not perfectly precise, but they clearly indicate thousands of deaths rather than dozens, and they are a standard part of post-disaster investigation, not a scheme concocted by Democrats for this particular disaster.

In October 2018, Trump took credit for a bill he did not pass, saying, “We also passed Veterans Choice. Any veterans in the room? Yes. You! Young veteran—young. We just passed Choice. That was 44 years, they’ve been trying to pass Choice. So that if you have to wait for nine days, 30 days, 21 days, months, you don’t do that anymore. If the line is big, and you’re unhappy, you go to a private doctor, they take care of you and we pay the bill.” The policy Trump described was the Veterans’ Access to Care through Choice, Accountability, and Transparency Act of 2014, signed into law by Obama and commonly known as Veterans Choice. Trump had recently signed a bill called the VA MISSION Act that renewed funding for the Veterans Choice program already in place. He continued to claim credit for Veterans Choice for years, and prematurely terminated a press conference in August 2020 when a reporter pointed out that the law was passed in 2014.

Later that month, when defending his decision to hold a rally the same day as a mass shooting, Trump said, “I remember when we had the attack in Manhattan. We opened that stock exchange the next day; people were shocked.” After closing due to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, The New York Stock Exchange reopened on September 17, not September 12.

In April 2019, Trump wrote, “Puerto Rico got 91 Billion Dollars for the hurricane, more money than has ever been gotten for a hurricane before, & all their local politicians do is complain & ask for more money.” Puerto Rico had been allocated forty billion dollars and received eleven billion dollars for relief after Hurricane Maria. Furthermore, the federal government spent considerably more on relief after Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana and surrounding areas in 2005.

In July 2019, Trump said that Twitter was blocking people from following his account: “I know that we’ve been blocked. People come up to me and they say, Sir, I can’t get you—I can’t follow you. They make it impossible.” Trump’s account has tens of millions of followers and his posts are routinely the subject of national news coverage without any indication that Twitter is blocking or hiding the account in any way. In October 2020, as I was writing this letter, he shared a satirical piece entitled “Twitter Shuts Down Entire Network To Slow Spread Of Negative Biden News,” writing, “Wow, this has never been done in history. This includes his really bad interview last night. Why is Twitter doing this.” He made no indication that he was aware the story was fictional, even though he used Twitter itself to share the piece.

In August 2019, he said, “I see what they are doing. I see it. They show me. The things we are doing in our country today. There’s never been anything like it. We will be ending the AIDS epidemic shortly in America, and curing childhood cancer very shortly.” There was no evidence that Trump had any inside information about a revolutionary new cure for AIDS or childhood cancer.

In September 2019, Trump wrote a social media post about Hurricane Dorian, stating that “In addition to Florida - South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, will most likely be hit (much) harder than anticipated.” The National Weather Service hurried to correct the claim, issuing an unequivocal statement that Alabama was not in the path of the hurricane and would not be affected by it. Later that day, Trump repeated his claim about Alabama in two separate speeches, saying “Alabama is going to get a piece of it, it looks like” and “Alabama could even be in for at least some very strong winds and something more than that, it could be.” A few days later, the White House released a video of Trump holding up a map showing an official forecast of the possible paths the hurricane could take. The white printed outline of the potentially affected area did not include Alabama, but someone had quite obviously used a black chisel tip marker to draw onto it a large protrusion extending into a portion of Alabama.

In November 2019, Trump wrote, “Today I opened a major Apple Manufacturing plant in Texas that will bring high paying jobs back to America.” He had, in fact, toured a plant that had been operational since the Obama administration.

In May 2020, Trump said that Joe Biden had called him xenophobic for his decision to restrict travel from China during the COVID-19 public health crisis. (Biden had called him xenophobic, but not for that reason.) Trump then invented an apology letter, saying, “Biden has now written a letter of apology because I did the right thing,” and “He actually apologized with a letter on a Friday night saying, ‘he made the right move.’” No such letter exists. Trump invented another apology letter a few months later, this time referring to the Commission on Presidential Debates. He said, “Take a look at the letter they wrote me four years ago, when they apologized. They were oscillating my mic. They were turning it up and down when I was speaking to Hillary, crooked Hillary.” No such letter exists, nor any evidence of tampering with Trump’s microphone during his debates with Hillary Clinton.

In May 2020, Trump also wrote a social media post promoting the unfounded conspiracy theory that Joe Scarborough committed murder. “When will they open a Cold Case on the

Psycho Joe Scarborough matter in Florida. Did he get away with murder? Some people think so. Why did he leave Congress so quietly and quickly? Isn't it obvious?" Scarborough, currently a television news commentator, served in the House of Representatives from 1994 through 2001, when he resigned to spend more time with his family.

Trump has also given ammunition to people promoting far more outlandish conspiracy theories. For example, there is currently a cultlike online community centered on the genuine belief, based on an anonymous post from a message board where people routinely invent bizarre stories for amusement, that the world (governments, companies, media, etc.) is run by Satanic child rapists and Donald Trump has a secret plan to stop them. This conspiracy theory, known as "QAnon," has received a fair amount of mainstream media attention both for its absurd content (some variants involve immortality, time travel, etc.) and for the FBI's investigation of terrorism threats related to extremist conspiracy belief. In August, Trump was asked about QAnon, and said, "I don't know much about the movement other than I understand that they like me very much, which I appreciate." A reporter explained to him that it is about "secretly saving the world from this satanic cult of pedophiles and cannibals," and Trump replied, "I haven't heard that. But is that supposed to be a bad thing or good thing? If I can help save the world from problems, I'm willing to do it. I'm willing to put myself out there." He has, in general, refrained from explicitly discrediting the nonsensical theory. Numerous people who believe the QAnon fiction have since achieved increased mainstream exposure, including dozens currently running for political office.

Trump has had a rivalry of sorts with Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in part because Fauci has been more forthcoming than Trump about the risks associated with the disease and the measures that would mitigate its spread. In July 2020, Fauci was invited to throw a ceremonial first pitch at a New York Yankees baseball game. On the day of Fauci's ceremonial pitch, Trump said, "Randy Levine is a great friend of mine from the Yankees, and he asked me to throw out the first pitch, and I think I'm doing that on August 15th at Yankee Stadium." Trump had not been invited to throw a pitch and later backtracked in a social media post claiming he was too busy: "Because of my strong focus on the China Virus, including scheduled meetings on Vaccines, our economy and much else, I won't be able to be in New York to throw out the opening pitch for the @Yankees on August 15th." (Recall from earlier his tendency to refer to COVID-19 as "the China Virus.")

Late last month, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died. She dictated a final message to her granddaughter, stating that "My most fervent wish is that I will not be replaced until a new president is installed." When the statement came up in an interview, Trump said, "I don't know that she said that, or was that written out by Adam Schiff and Schumer and Pelosi—I would be more inclined to the second." (Schiff, Schumer, and Pelosi are prominent Democratic politicians.) Without any evidence, explanation, or compunction, he accused a grieving granddaughter (and the others in Ginsburg's room who heard the same statement) of fabricating a dying woman's last words at the behest of his political opponents.

Trump once said, "As a very active President with many things happening, it is not possible for my surrogates to stand at podium with perfect accuracy." This statement does not explain his own inconsistencies, misstatements, and lies. It might not always be obvious which fabrications Trump believed to be true at the time he said them—but more importantly, it seems that he generally does not care whether what he is saying is true. Trump's behavior shows that there is sometimes little difference between knowingly making a false statement and confidently asserting something without knowing or caring whether it is true.

## Suppression of the Press

Trump has a tendency to repeat specific short phrases over and over, in speech and in writing. One of those phrases is “fake news.” He borrowed the term from people who were tackling the problem of malicious websites, designed to look like legitimate news sources, spreading stories about fictional events as though they were true. Trump uses the phrase to refer instead to ordinary news sources that criticize him in any way. He has done so hundreds of times over the past five years. This “fake news” catchphrase is part of his larger effort to discredit and suppress journalism and encourage his supporters to rely on him for information.

In February 2017, Trump wrote on social media, “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!” He reiterated this verbally a few days later, saying, “I called the fake news media the enemy of the people, and they are.” Later that month, the White House denied reporters from the New York Times and CNN (both mentioned in the social media post above) access to a White House press briefing. Among others, a reporter from Breitbart News, the “platform for the alt-right” formerly led by White House advisor Steve Bannon, was allowed in. Trump repeated the “enemy of the people” characterization several more times. For example, in October 2018, a few days after CNN received an explosive device in the mail, Trump wrote, “The Fake News Media, the true Enemy of the People, must stop the open & obvious hostility & report the news accurately & fairly.” In April 2019, he wrote, “The press is doing everything within their power to fight the magnificence of the phrase, MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN! They can’t stand the fact that this Administration has done more than virtually any other Administration in its first 2yrs. They are truly the ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE!”

Peter, the freedom of the press is guaranteed in the First Amendment to the US Constitution for a reason. Independent journalism fosters a more informed public and reduces the extent to which governments can control narratives about their own systems and policies. By calling the press the enemy of the people because they criticize him, Trump has expressed that he prioritizes ego over both truth and democracy.

In October 2017, Trump wrote a social media post asking, “Why Isn’t the Senate Intel Committee looking into the Fake News Networks in OUR country to see why so much of our news is just made up-FAKE!” The Senate Intelligence Committee, as its name implies, focuses on national intelligence, not journalistic ethics, and was at the time investigating Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, a touchy subject for Trump connected to his eventual impeachment. Later that month, he wrote, “With all of the Fake News coming out of NBC and the Networks, at what point is it appropriate to challenge their License? Bad for country!” Many people read this as an empty threat to selectively suppress the activities of news agencies that criticized him.

In November 2017, he wrote, “We should have a contest as to which of the Networks, plus CNN and not including Fox, is the most dishonest, corrupt and/or distorted in its political coverage of your favorite President (me). They are all bad. Winner to receive the FAKE NEWS TROPHY!” Trump is known to watch Fox News, which is routinely less critical of him than many other networks. There is no evidence that Fox’s reporting is more accurate than other networks. In January 2018, he added to the idea, “I will be announcing THE MOST DISHONEST & CORRUPT MEDIA AWARDS OF THE YEAR on Monday at 5:00 o’clock. Subjects will cover Dishonesty & Bad Reporting in various categories from the Fake News Media. Stay tuned!”

In August 2018, Trump wrote, “Google search results for ‘Trump News’ shows only the viewing/reporting of Fake New Media. In other words, they have it RIGGED, for me & others, so that almost all stories & news is BAD. Fake CNN is prominent. Republican/Conservative & Fair Media is shut out.” From Trump’s point of view, it seems, any critical news coverage must be rigged. Later that month, he articulated a similar kind of conspiratorial thinking when he claimed that television camera operators fabricated technical difficulties to suppress his “fake news” catchphrase. He said, “when I start screaming ‘fake news,’ you see those red lights go off for a little while. You know, excuse me, we have technical difficulties, OK, then they go back.”

### **Suppression of Protest and Criticism**

In addition to viewing “the press” as “the enemy of the people,” Trump seems to view the “people” themselves as an enemy when they exercise their right to protest against him. He has sought to dismiss, undermine, and crack down on protesters. I discussed some of this rhetoric and behavior above, in the section on authoritarianism. Here, I mention more examples of lying about protesters and/or suppressing dissent.

Trump has repeatedly claimed that people who protest against him, or who protest for reasons he does not agree with, are hired stooges. For example, in April 2017 after protesters asked him to release his tax returns, he wrote, “Someone should look into who paid for the small organized rallies yesterday. The election is over!” He repeated this concept several times about various protests, including in October 2018 when he wrote, “The very rude elevator screamers are paid professionals only looking to make Senators look bad. Don’t fall for it! Also, look at all of the professionally made identical signs. Paid for by Soros and others. These are not signs made in the basement from love! #Troublemakers.” (Two women had recently accused a Republican Senator in an elevator of silencing sexual assault victims by insufficiently investigating the accusations against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. George Soros is a billionaire who has donated large sums to Democratic political campaigns.) Shortly thereafter, Trump wrote, “The paid D.C. protesters are now ready to REALLY protest because they haven’t gotten their checks - in other words, they weren’t paid! Screamers in Congress, and outside, were far too obvious - less professional than anticipated by those paying (or not paying) the bills!”

Recall the section on authoritarianism, where I mentioned that Trump had asked supporters at his rallies to extract protesters by force, including saying “knock the crap out of them” and “I will pay for the legal fees.” In one such case, three protesters sued the president after they were injured by his supporters at a rally. Trump’s lawyers argued that “protestors have their own First Amendment right to express dissenting views, but they have no right to do so as part of the campaign rally of the political candidates they oppose,” and that this would be the case “even if Mr. Trump implicitly instructed the audience to remove the protesters by using force.”

In 2016 and 2017, many sports players, including professional football players, participated in a protest against police brutality and racism by kneeling during the national anthem. In September 2017, Trump said, “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out. He’s fired. He’s fired!’” He repeated the urge to fire protesting players during subsequent speeches. In October, after his calls to fire players went unheeded, he attempted to threaten the NFL financially, writing, “Why is the NFL getting massive tax breaks while at the same time disrespecting our Anthem, Flag and Country? Change tax law!” In May 2018, he said, “You have to stand proudly for the national anthem, or you shouldn’t be playing, you shouldn’t be there. Maybe you shouldn’t be in the country.”

As I mentioned in the section on authoritarianism, Trump has carried out a protracted rhetorical campaign to undermine the credibility of the 2020 presidential election and mail-in ballots in particular. In May 2020, he posted comments on Twitter claiming that mail-in ballots are systematically fraudulent, and when Twitter marked them with a “fact check warning,” he said, “Republicans feel that Social Media Platforms totally silence conservatives voices. We will strongly regulate, or close them down, before we can ever allow this to happen.” In other words, he threatened to shut down the platform for taking steps toward mitigating the spread of misinformation, because he was the source of that misinformation.

Peter, I have referred back to the section on authoritarianism several times here, because Trump has often used authoritarian tactics to suppress criticism. Before I move on, I want to do so one more time. Recall the protests in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd, and Trump’s threat to deploy an “occupying force” of “heavily armed soldiers” to “dominate” the protesters. Trump also spread conspiracy theories and misinformation about the protests. In June, when a 75-year-old man was seriously injured by police, Trump accused him of faking it, writing, “Buffalo protester shoved by Police could be an ANTIFA provocateur. 75 year old Martin Gugino was pushed away after appearing to scan police communications in order to black out the equipment. @OANN I watched, he fell harder than was pushed. Was aiming scanner. Could be a set up?” There was no evidence for any of what Trump wrote.

Trump also repeatedly referred to protesters, particularly those protesting the killing of George Floyd and other instances of police brutality, as “anarchists.” In June 2020, he wrote, “Any protesters, anarchists, agitators, looters or lowlifes who are going to Oklahoma please understand, you will not be treated like you have been in New York, Seattle, or Minneapolis. It will be a much different scene!” In July, he lauded the federal agents he had sent to Portland to intimidate anti-racism protesters, saying, “They grab them; a lot of people in jail. They’re leaders. These are anarchists. These are not protestors. People say ‘protestors’; these people are anarchists. These are people that hate our country. And we’re not going to let it go forward.” In August, he said, “Protesters. You know what I say? Protesters, your ass. I don’t talk about my ass. They’re not protesters. Those aren’t protesters. Those are anarchists, they’re agitators, they’re rioters, they’re looters.” He also said, “It has nothing to do with George Floyd or anything. It doesn’t have to do with anything. They don’t even know who George Floyd is. They don’t even know who George Floyd is. They have no idea. If you ask them who is George Floyd, they couldn’t tell you. These are just bad people.” Peter, it is extremely unlikely that anti-racism protesters in 2020 are unaware of who George Floyd is. Trump’s strategy in response to protests about racism seems to be to ignore their central message and accuse protesters of being violent anarchists in order to stoke fear and prevent productive dialogue.

## **Opposition to Science and Education**

Trump’s hostility toward dissent, protest, journalism, and open dialogue can be read as an opposition to truth-seeking itself—a rejection of the idea that one might not already know what is true and might need to rigorously search the space of available information to come to a conclusion. This stance manifests in words and deeds that undermine science and education, as well.

**Trump appointed an underqualified Secretary of Education.** At the start of his term, Trump nominated Betsy DeVos for the position of Secretary of Education. She had no educational credentials of note, no experience in government, and essentially no connection to the public school system. Her main education-related claim to fame was through the years that she spent in Michigan advocating for policies to benefit private schools—and even for-profit

schools—over public schools. Her Senate confirmation vote was a tie, and she took office after Vice President Mike Pence broke the tie in her favor, making her confirmation vote the narrowest in US history for a Cabinet member.

**Trump attacks schools and universities for teaching students about racism.** In July 2020, he wrote, “Too many Universities and School Systems are about Radical Left Indoctrination, not Education. Therefore, I am telling the Treasury Department to re-examine their Tax-Exempt Status and/or Funding, which will be taken away if this Propaganda or Act Against Public Policy continues. Our children must be Educated, not Indoctrinated!” A wide variety of nonprofit organizations in the US are exempt from certain kinds of taxes because their revenue goes toward furthering their social purposes. To selectively target schools and universities with revocation of tax-exempt status is to question the validity of their social purpose. Peter, a robust education system is the very foundation of what makes human civilization possible—we learn as much as we can from those who came before us.

Some of Trump’s other statements provide clues about what topics he would prefer students to remain ignorant about—what he considers to be “indoctrination” rather than “education” and therefore perhaps unworthy of tax-exempt status. Specifically, he would like to see less education about slavery and racism in US history.

In 2019, the New York Times launched the 1619 Project, a collection of essays and other materials highlighting the role of slavery in US history. As you know, Peter, slavery was a core aspect of US society for more than two hundred years, during which time millions of Black people were treated as property and brutalized at the hands of hundreds of thousands of White people. It is well-known and plainly obvious that this history of slavery has had consequences lasting beyond the end of the Civil War 155 years ago. There are people alive today whose parents were enslaved. Nonetheless, Trump despises the 1619 Project for even attempting to discuss the lasting consequences of slavery. In a September 2020 speech, he said, “The left has warped, distorted, and defiled the American story with deceptions, falsehoods, and lies. There is no better example than the New York Times’ totally discredited 1619 Project. This project rewrites American history to teach our children that we were founded on the principle of oppression, not freedom. Nothing could be further from the truth. America’s founding set in motion the unstoppable chain of events that abolished slavery, secured civil rights, defeated communism and fascism, and built the most fair, equal, and prosperous nation in human history.” Trump’s interpretation of the 1619 Project’s purpose is twisted, and his assessment of the inevitability of historical events is brazenly overconfident. Also, incidentally, the US is quite obviously not the most equal nation in history. For example, income inequality is far higher in the US than in many other developed nations at this very moment.

I am going to quote at length from the same September 2020 speech, because Trump went beyond attacking the 1619 Project to convey a chilling vision for the future of “education.” He said, “Our mission is to defend the legacy of America’s founding, the virtue of America’s heroes, and the nobility of the American character. We must clear away the twisted web of lies in our schools and classrooms, and teach our children the magnificent truth about our country. We want our sons and daughters to know that they are the citizens of the most exceptional nation in the history of the world.” Historical figures, like people in general, typically have complex, mixed effects on the world around them. If the mission of education is merely to “defend ... the virtue” of a historical figure, that mission is incompatible with seeking the nuanced truth. Trump went on to connect his discomfort with historical truth-seeking to his vilification of anti-racism protesters (who he typically refers to as “rioters” and “anarchists”). He said, “As many of you

testified today, the left-wing rioting and mayhem are the direct result of decades of left-wing indoctrination in our schools. It's gone on far too long." Remember, for Trump, acknowledging the slavery had lasting effects counts as "left-wing indoctrination." He went on to say, "Critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together. It will destroy our country."

Finally, Trump put forth his own idea of what schools should do. He said, "That is why it is so urgent that we finally restore patriotic education to our schools. Under our leadership, the National Endowment for the Humanities has awarded a grant to support the development of a pro-American curriculum that celebrates the truth about our nation's great history." He continued, "Today, I am also pleased to announce that I will soon sign an Executive Order establishing a national commission to promote patriotic education. It will be called the '1776 Commission.'" The repeated concept of "patriotic education" is deeply disturbing. It suggests that the president views education for its own sake as unpatriotic. He does not want students searching for truth, he wants them building a commitment to belief in American superiority even if it comes at the expense of truth.

**Trump banned federal grants for certain kinds of research about racial bias.** Trump enacted his vision for suppressing the study of racism via a September 2020 executive order restricting grant-funded research and anti-bias training for federal agencies. The order included a requirement for grant recipients to certify that they "will not use Federal funds to promote" certain concepts. One of the prohibited concepts is that "members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex." Scientific research has made it clear that people who live in a society with race and gender bias develop the capability to inadvertently reproduce that bias through their own behavior, and that consciously trying to ignore race and gender can make this inadvertent bias more likely rather than less. There are situations where a legitimate case can be made that one should not merely "attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex." Another prohibited concept is that "meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist, or were created by a particular race to oppress another race." In some cases, these concepts *have* been used to justify or reinforce racial oppression, and this language seems to prohibit full discussion of those cases. Yet another prohibited concept is that "the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist." Depending on one's interpretation of the terms "United States" and "fundamentally," this item could be read as prohibiting discussion of racist or sexist actions on the part of the US government, examples of which abound in history.

**Trump has taken steps to stop government scientists from communicating straightforwardly.** Immediately after Trump took office, his administration issued orders to several scientific agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, prohibiting employees from "providing updates on social media or to reporters." Later that year, the Trump administration directed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention not to use certain words in documents related to their budget proposal. Those words included "diversity," "transgender," "evidence-based," and "science-based."

**Trump attempts to suppress information about climate change.** Keeping with the pattern of prohibiting certain words, the Trump administration instructed staff at the United States Department of Agriculture and the Department of Energy not to use the phrase "climate change." They also instructed the EPA to remove climate change information from their website, including deleting the phrase "climate change" from pages where it was used and hiding pages



that had described climate change and measures to mitigate it. In October 2017, three EPA scientists were scheduled to give talks pertaining to climate change at a scientific conference; they were forced to cancel at the last minute.

Trump has also appointed numerous high-ranking officials who downplay climate change, representing a purposeful, one-sided departure from the scientific consensus. His first EPA administrator, Scott Pruitt, said in March 2017 of carbon dioxide, “I would not agree that it’s a primary contributor to the global warming that we see.” At the time, the EPA’s website still said, “Carbon dioxide is the primary greenhouse gas that is contributing to recent climate change,” but that statement was later removed. Pruitt resigned in 2018 and Trump replaced him with Andrew Wheeler, a man who had just a few months earlier accused the EPA of “brainwashing our kids.” Trump’s first Secretary of Energy, Rick Perry, expressed that the primary cause of climate change is “the ocean waters and this environment that we live in” rather than carbon dioxide. His NASA administrator, Jim Bridenstine, has said that “The United States does not have a big enough carbon footprint to make a difference” to the global climate.

In 2017, Trump announced that he would withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, a weak international agreement to monitor and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The vast majority of countries are parties to the agreement, accounting for more than 97% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions—at least until the US finishes withdrawing (legally, the withdrawal process will conclude next month).

## **COVID-19 Deception**

The COVID-19 pandemic erupted around the world in early 2020. As of this writing, well over two hundred thousand people have died of the disease in the US, and hundreds of thousands likely have lasting complications resulting from it.

**Trump purposefully downplayed the severity of COVID-19 and opposed efforts to limit its spread.** To illustrate, I will compare some of his public statements during the early months of the pandemic to statements that he made privately in interviews with Bob Woodward. I describe these interviews as “private” here not because they were off the record, but because they were intended to inform a book to be released at a later date rather than published in the news immediately. Woodward released recordings of some of the interviews months later, providing the quotations listed below.

In February, Trump publicly said of the virus, “It’s going to disappear. One day—it’s like a miracle—it will disappear.” He also said that when Democrats asked for more serious containment measures, they were “politicizing” the virus, calling requests for more action from his administration “their new hoax.” He also repeatedly likened COVID-19 to flu, implying that COVID-19 was less dangerous. For example, in February, he said, “35 thousand people on average die each year from the flu. Did anyone know that? 35 thousand. That’s a lot of people. It could go to 100 thousand, it could be 27 thousand, they say usually a minimum of 27, it goes up to 100 thousand people a year who die, and so far we have lost nobody to coronavirus in the United States. Nobody. And it doesn’t mean we won’t, and we are totally prepared, it doesn’t mean we won’t. But think of it. You hear 35 and 40 thousand people, and we’ve lost nobody, and you wonder, the press is in hysteria mode.” In March, he wrote, “So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!” Trump made these statements while COVID-19 was just beginning to spread, implying that it was less deadly than influenza. They contradict what he

said privately in an early February interview with Woodward: “you just breathe the air and that’s how it’s passed. And so that’s a very tricky one. That’s a very delicate one. It’s also more deadly than even your strenuous flus.” (When this statement came out months later, it was also controversial because Trump had publicly downplayed the risk of airborne transmission and the importance of masks.)

In March, Trump said publicly, “The vast majority of Americans: The risk is very, very low. Young and healthy people can expect to recover fully and quickly if they should get the virus. The highest risk is for elderly population with underlying health conditions. The elderly population must be very, very careful.” That same month, he said privately to Woodward that it affects “Young people too. Plenty of young people.”

In March, Trump also said publicly, “Now, this is just my hunch, and—but based on a lot of conversations with a lot of people that do this, because a lot of people will have this, and it’s very mild. They will get better very rapidly. They don’t even see a doctor.” He also said, “if we have thousands or hundreds of thousands of people that get better just by, you know, sitting around and even going to work—some of them go to work, but they get better.” He wrote a social media post the next day to clarify that he did not mean that people *should* go back to work, but his verbal statements still suggested that the risk was much lower than he knew it to be.

In a private interview in April, Trump told Woodward, “It moves rapidly, Bob. It moves rapidly and viciously. If you’re the wrong person and if it gets you, your life is pretty much over if you’re in the wrong group.” Yet, speaking publicly as late as July, he said “we show cases, 99% of which are totally harmless” and “Many of those cases are young people who would heal in a day, they have the sniffles and we put it down as a test.”

The discrepancy between what Trump knew and what he told the public can be partly explained by a statement he made in March to Woodward: “I wanted to always play it down. I still like playing it down because I don’t want to create a panic.” It seems that the kind of panic Trump was nervous about had more to do with the stock market than with pandemic preparedness. In February, he wrote publicly that “The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA. We are in contact with everyone and all relevant countries. CDC & World Health have been working hard and very smart. Stock Market starting to look very good to me!” In August, he emphasized the stock market again in a conversation with Woodward. Trump accused Woodward of caring more about the virus than the economy, and Woodward said that they’re linked. Trump replied that they’re linked “a little bit,” and continued, “I mean, more than a little bit. But the economy is doing—look, we’re close to a new stock market record.”

Peter, Trump’s general disdain for truth was obvious before Woodward released those recordings, but Trump’s lies about COVID-19 are particularly egregious examples. They conflicted with what he knew to be true, they exacerbated the death toll in the US, and he has expressed no concern or compunction about any of them.

**Trump downplayed the importance of masks.** Medical experts around the country called for people to wear masks in public to dramatically reduce the probability that viruses in one person’s breath would be inhaled by another person. Trump chose not to set an example in this regard; he was not seen wearing a mask until July. In April, he explained his decision not to wear a mask, saying, “You can do it. You don’t have to do it. I’m choosing not to do it, but some people may want to do it, and that’s OK.” In May, he asked a reporter not to wear a mask, saying, “Can you take it off, because I cannot hear you.” The reporter said, “I’ll just speak louder, sir,” and Trump replied, “Ok, you want to be politically correct. Go ahead.” This exchange illustrates his general tendency to present mask-wearing as a left-wing political

statement rather than a public health measure. Many of his more ardent supporters continue to eschew masks, likely at least in part because he does so himself. This choice makes them much more likely to accidentally spread COVID-19 to others.

In May, Trump was asked about his decision not to wear a mask at a tour of a manufacturing plant in Michigan. He said, “I had one on before. I wore one in this back area, but I didn’t want to give the press the pleasure of seeing it.” He also used social media to share a supporter’s opinion piece entitled, “Mandatory Masks Aren’t About Safety, They’re About Social Control” (several states had implemented temporary rules requiring people to wear masks in public). In September, he said, “There are people that don’t think masks are good.” In his first debate with Joe Biden, he said, “I don’t wear a mask like him. Every time you see him, he’s got a mask. He could be speaking 200 feet away from him and he shows up with the biggest mask I’ve ever seen.” Many people interpreted this as an implication that wearing a mask is a sign of frivolity or weakness. His guests at the debate did not wear masks. Shortly after the debate, Trump himself was hospitalized for COVID-19—yet his administration still did not require masks in the White House.

Trump has downplayed other containment measures, too. For example, he has generally not encouraged attendees at his rallies to maintain physical distance from one another, in defiance of recommendations from public health experts. In June, before a rally in Tulsa, the venue had placed “do not sit here” labels on some of the seats so that people would sit farther apart. Volunteers for Trump’s campaign were seen removing the labels before the event.

**Trump has advocated for less COVID-19 testing.** In March, Trump referred to the World Health Organization’s COVID-19 test as “a bad test.” There was no evidence that it performed worse than other leading COVID-19 tests. In May, he said, “If we did very little testing, we wouldn’t have the most cases,” and “When you test, you find something is wrong with people. If we didn’t do any testing we would have very few cases.” He has repeatedly called testing “overrated” and said that “it makes us look bad.” In June, he said, “When you do testing to that extent, you’re going to find more people, you’re going to find more cases. So I said to my people slow the testing down, please. They test and they test. We had tests and people don’t know what’s going on. We got tests, we got another one over here. The young man’s 10 years old. He’s got the sniffles. He’ll recover in about 15 minutes.”

**Trump aggressively denounced state virus containment efforts that he viewed as excessive.** Some states took more measures than others to contain the spread of COVID. Your home state, Michigan, was one of the more proactive ones. In March, Governor Gretchen Whitmer issued an executive order asking residents to stay at home except for essential activities. Since then, Trump has lashed out at her. In April, he wrote “LIBERATE MICHIGAN!” and “LIBERATE MINNESOTA!” on social media. (Minnesota had a similar order.) More recently, he told supporters at a rally in Michigan, “You’ve got to get your governor to open up your state” and encouraged them to chant “Lock her up” about Whitmer, even joining in himself to say “Lock ‘em all up.” About a week earlier, Whitmer had been the target of a kidnapping attempt by an extremist group. Trump made light of this, saying “I guess they said she was threatened. Right? She was threatened. And she blamed me! She blamed me. And our people were the ones who worked her people. So, we’ll see what happens. Let’s see what happens.” (Whitmer had accused Trump of inspiring or emboldening extremists like her kidnappers with statements like “LIBERATE MICHIGAN!”)

He has also overstated his own authority with regard to stay-at-home orders. In April, he wrote, “For the purpose of creating conflict and confusion, some in the Fake News Media are

saying that it is the Governors decision to open up the states, not that of the President of the United States & the Federal Government. Let it be fully understood that this is incorrect. It is the decision of the President, and for many good reasons.” This is not true. Governors do have the authority to issue temporary stay-at-home orders regardless of what the president says.

Trump has criticized others besides state governors, too. In April, Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, noted that “if you had a process that was ongoing and you started mitigation earlier, you could have saved lives.” Trump shared a post on social media in which a supporter suggested that Fauci was criticizing Trump and concluded with “Time to #FireFauci.” Trump has not actually fired Fauci, but as I was writing this letter, he called Fauci a “disaster” and said, “Every time he goes on television, there’s always a bomb, but there’s a bigger bomb if you fire him.” (Trump was likely referring to a political approval “bomb,” because polls suggest that Fauci is currently fairly popular.)

**Trump attempts to blame others for his administration’s inadequate COVID-19 response.** For example, in March 2020, he said, “The Obama administration made a decision on testing that turned out to be very detrimental to what we’re doing. And we undid that decision a few days ago so that the testing can take place in a much more accurate and rapid fashion.” Later that month, he wrote “For decades the @CDCgov looked at, and studied, its testing system, but did nothing about it. It would always be inadequate and slow for a large scale pandemic, but a pandemic would never happen, they hoped. President Obama made changes that only complicated things further.” These statements about Obama are not true—his administration created no such policy.

Later that month, Trump said that New York Governor Andrew Cuomo “rejected buying recommended sixteen thousand ventilators in 2015 for the pandemic, for a pandemic, established death panels and lotteries instead. So, he had a chance to buy, in 2015, sixteen thousand ventilators at a very low price, and he turned it down.” The sixteen thousand figure comes from a 2015 report indicating a worst-case-scenario in which the state would be short by approximately that many ventilators, but unable to use them even if they had them due to insufficient personnel. There was no specific purchase opportunity, and certainly no “death panels” or lotteries. (New York, like Michigan, is one of the states that adopted stronger pandemic containment measures, raising Trump’s ire.)

**Trump has promoted unsupported and dangerous treatments.** Trump has spread (and in some cases invented) unsupported rumors about COVID-19 treatments. For example, in March, Trump wrote, “HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE & AZITHROMYCIN, taken together, have a real chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine.” These drugs had not been tested or approved for this purpose. After Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stressed that there was insufficient evidence to justify recommending hydroxychloroquine, Trump said, “If it were me—in fact, I might do it anyway. I may take it, okay? I may take it.” In July, somebody posted a video on social media depicting several people dressed as doctors making false claims that “you don’t need masks” to mitigate the pandemic and that hydroxychloroquine would be an effective treatment. Facebook and Twitter removed the video for blatantly spreading misinformation about an ongoing public health crisis, but not before Trump himself shared it. The next day, he said, “There was a group of doctors yesterday, a large group that were put on the internet, and for some reason, the internet wanted to take them down and took them off. I guess Twitter took them off and I think Facebook took them off. I don’t know why.”

In April, Trump took his bizarre overconfidence about unproven treatments to a new level when he said, “So, supposing we hit the body with a tremendous—whether it’s ultraviolet or just very powerful light—and I think you said that that hasn’t been checked, but you’re going to test it. And then I said, supposing you brought the light inside the body, which you can do either through the skin or in some other way, and I think you said you’re going to test that too. It sounds interesting.” He continued, “And then I see the disinfectant, where it knocks it out in a minute. One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning. Because you see it gets in the lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs. So it would be interesting to check that.” Peter, I’m sure you’re well aware that injecting disinfectants is extremely dangerous and serves no legitimate medical purpose. There was some evidence of an uptick in household cleaner poisonings in the aftermath of Trump’s statement. When this uptick was brought to his attention later, he said, “I can’t imagine why.”

**The Trump administration threatened to deport international students during the pandemic.** Many universities (including, for example, Harvard) planned to hold Fall 2020 classes on the internet to minimize face-to-face contact and thereby reduce the spread of COVID-19. In response, Immigration and Customs Enforcement announced plans to deport international students whose Fall 2020 classes would all be online. Some interpreted this move as retaliation against universities for holding online classes, since such measures implied that the pandemic was more serious than Trump claimed. Regardless of the purpose, the proposed policy fit in with the administration’s xenophobic rhetoric surrounding COVID-19 (e.g., “China virus”; see the section of this letter on bigotry). After widespread pushback, ICE rescinded the policy.

**Trump has promoted a self-serving narrative about a COVID-19 vaccine.** In August, he said that a vaccine could be ready to distribute to the public “sooner than the end of the year, could be much sooner” and possibly even “right around” election day. As usual, he provided no evidence for those claims, and they contradicted predictions made by medical experts including Anthony Fauci. Later that month, Trump wrote on social media that “The deep state, or whoever, over at the FDA is making it very difficult for drug companies to get people in order to test the vaccines and therapeutics. Obviously, they are hoping to delay the answer until after November 3rd.” “The deep state” is a phrase commonly used by conspiracy theorists to describe people who they believe secretly control the government. Trump seems to have a habit of viewing inconvenient features of reality as the machinations of his enemies.

**Trump has made numerous other false statements about COVID-19.** On March 24, he said, “We’ve done more tests in eight days than South Korea has done in eight weeks.” South Korea had been lauded for its high per-capita test rate, which far exceeded that of the US—but even ignoring population size, Trump’s statement was incorrect. In May, a reporter asked Trump about new epidemiological predictions for the number of deaths likely to result from COVID-19 in the coming months. Trump said, “Those models that you’re mentioning are talking about without mitigation,” but the death projection model did factor in mitigation efforts. Later that month, he said, “Germany and the United States are the two best in deaths per hundred thousand people, which, frankly, to me, that’s perhaps the most important number there is.” Population-adjusted COVID-19 deaths were far higher in the US than in many other countries at the time, including Canada and South Korea. In July, Trump said in an interview, “We have one of the lowest mortality rates in the world.” When the interviewer corrected him, he continued, “I heard we had the best mortality rate. Number one low mortality rate.” The US in fact had a one of the highest number of deaths per capita, and far from the lowest deaths per confirmed case. In

August, he said, “We’re coming back and our numbers are better than almost all countries.” US per-capita cases and deaths were still among the highest in the world.

In August, Trump also said, “This thing is going away, it will go away like things go away,” and “If you look at children, children are almost, I would almost say definitely, but almost immune from this disease.” Hundreds of thousands of children have contracted the disease, although their symptoms tend to be milder than those of adults. Later that month, he shared a social media post by a QAnon adherent (recall the outlandish conspiracy theory mentioned earlier) alleging that the 94% of COVID-19 deaths were not actually due to the pandemic because death certificates listed multiple causes, typically specific symptoms of COVID-19 such as respiratory failure. When reporters asked his press secretary why Trump was so blatantly downplaying COVID-19 deaths, she said, “he was highlighting new CDC information that came out that was worth noting.”

To review, despite Trump’s previous efforts to undermine nearly every scientific agency, the CDC was still more than capable in early 2020 of issuing recommendations that would have mitigated the death toll of the COVID-19 pandemic. Trump admitted to purposefully downplaying it. He sowed confusion about the best containment practices, discouraged mask-wearing, and promoted fake cures. More than two hundred thousand people have died. Peter, if someone ever tries to convince you that a leader with despicable motives will be “harmless” simply because they are incompetent, remember that you cannot perfectly anticipate the crisis responses they will have the opportunity to sabotage.

### **Behavior Incompatible with Adequate Leadership**

I have chosen to focus the bulk of the letter on Trump’s authoritarianism, bigotry, and antipathy for truth. In this section, I briefly mention some of his other behavior that is incompatible with adequate leadership.

#### **Sexual Assault**

Dozens of women have accused Trump of touching them sexually without their consent. During his 2016 presidential campaign, a recording from 2005 was made public in which he seemed to brag about this behavior. On the way to meet a woman for a publicity event, he said, “I better use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her. You know, I’m automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.” The person he was speaking to said “Whatever you want,” and Trump replied, “Grab ’em by the pussy. You can do anything.” The idea that he believed that women “let” him “grab them by the pussy” without warning mirrored several of the accounts given by women he has allegedly groped over the years.

When confronted in the days that followed, Trump defended his language as “locker room banter.” He appeared to believe that most people were concerned about his use of the word “pussy,” rather than about his willingness to brag about sexual assault and his view that failure to object in the moment constitutes “letting” it happen. His statements since have made it plain that he does not view consent as a particularly important consideration. Peter, many of us naively thought that the publication of this recording would seriously hurt Trump’s campaign. “Grab them by the pussy” was so blatant and so contrary to conservatives’ stated values that surely even Trump’s erstwhile defenders would want to distance themselves. Four years later, his supporters have made their true priorities somewhat more clear.

In December 2017, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand criticized Trump over the sexual assault allegations against him. He wrote, “Lightweight Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, a total flunky for Chuck Schumer and someone who would come to my office ‘begging’ for campaign contributions not so long ago (and would do anything for them), is now in the ring fighting against Trump. Very disloyal to Bill & Crooked-USED!” Peter, this man used sexually harassing language to try to deflect attention from his sexual assault allegations. He has also said of one of his accusers, “she’s not my type.”

Trump has also openly supported other people who were credibly accused of sexual assault. In 2017, Democrat Doug Jones defeated Republican Roy Moore in a special election to determine Jeff Sessions’ successor as Senator from Alabama. Moore lost in a heavily Republican state because he was accused of assaulting numerous underage girls, and while he denied violating the law, he did not deny “dating” 16-year-olds. Trump endorsed his campaign.

In July 2018, Trump nominated Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Psychology professor Christine Blasey Ford immediately reached out to journalists to report that Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her years earlier, and provided evidence that she had relayed the story to a therapist well before Kavanaugh became a major public figure. Her initial comments were confidential, but she subsequently decided to make her name public. Kavanaugh proceeded to lash out in unbridled rage. He accused Ford and Democrats of carrying out a politically motivated character assassination. He made his allegiance to Republicans clear despite strong norms for judges to be nonpartisan. He showed no interest in allowing facts to be adjudicated to determine whether and when an assault occurred and who committed it. In short, he did not take the allegation seriously. The allegation was credible, but even if it was entirely false, Kavanaugh’s reaction was entirely inappropriate for a Supreme Court Justice. This letter is about Trump, not Kavanaugh, so I will spare you the details, but videos of Kavanaugh’s testimony are available online.

Trump could have supported a thorough investigation. He could even have nominated someone else. Instead, he mocked Ford, imitating her in an October speech: “What neighborhood was it? And I don’t know. Where’s the house? I don’t know. Upstairs? Downstairs? Where was it? I don’t know. But I had one beer, that’s the only thing I remember. And a man’s life is in tatters.” A reporter later reminded Trump of the incident, saying, “I watched you mimic her and thousands of people were laughing at her,” and then “Do you think you treated her with respect?” Trump replied, “I think so, yeah. I did.” The reporter said, “But you seem to be saying that she lied,” and Trump said, “You know what? I’m not gonna get into it because we won. It doesn’t matter. We won.” But it apparently did matter to him, because once Kamala Harris became the Democratic Party’s nominee for vice president, Trump called her “nasty” for questioning Kavanaugh about Ford’s accusation during the confirmation process. He said that she “was the meanest, most horrible, most disrespectful of anybody in the US Senate.”

## **Corruption**

Trump has used his role as President to promote his family’s business interests. He has had foreign diplomats stay at his hotel, rented space to organizations owned by foreign governments, and used his platform to advertise his daughter’s jewelry business. The military under his leadership has rented space in Trump Tower just in case he decides to sleep there while in office. He attempted to hold the 2020 G7 summit at a resort owned by his organization. Based on the other information you have about him, Peter, it should not come as much of a surprise that Trump has no qualms about using his power for personal gain. He also appointed people who

worked for his campaign to federal positions even in cases where they had little or no relevant expertise.

### **Demanding Loyalty**

Trump seems to demand loyalty over honesty in his associates. For example, according to former FBI Director James Comey, Trump invited him to a private meeting at which he said, “I need loyalty, I expect loyalty.” Comey reports that Trump later asked him to stop the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election that eventually led to Trump’s impeachment, or at least convince the public that there was no such investigation, “Because I have been very loyal to you, very loyal; we had that thing you know.” A month later, the investigation was still ongoing, and Trump fired Comey. Explaining the decision, he said, “when I decided to just do it, said to myself, I said, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made-up story, it’s an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election that they should’ve won.”

When Trump’s attorney general Jeff Sessions recused himself from the aforementioned Russia investigation, Trump said, “Sessions should have never recused himself, and if he was going to recuse himself, he should have told me before he took the job, and I would have picked somebody else.” Many perceived this as a statement that he prefers his appointees to serve him personally rather than the duties of their offices.

### **Narcissism and Bullying**

Numerous sources close to the president have indicated that his private behavior is just as petty, self-aggrandizing, and irrational as his public behavior. Many personal accounts from former Trump officials back up this claim, and I encourage you to seek them out if you have doubts about my assessment. It should be clear by this point in the letter that he engages in behavior inappropriate for a leadership role nearly constantly. Here, I list a small selection of the many additional examples not covered above.

In May 2017, as several world leaders were standing together for a photograph at a summit, Trump pushed aside the Prime Minister of Montenegro so that he could stand front and center. The episode was caught on video.

In August 2017, after several CEOs resigned from the American Manufacturing Council over Trump’s refusal to repudiate the Unite the Right rally (see the White supremacy subsection of the bigotry section above), Trump dissolved the council, writing, “Rather than putting pressure on the businesspeople of the Manufacturing Council & Strategy & Policy Forum, I am ending both. Thank you all!”

In November 2017, a reporter asked Trump about unfilled positions in the State Department, and Trump replied, “Let me tell you, the one that matters is me. I’m the only one that matters, because when it comes to it, that’s what the policy is going to be. You’ve seen that, you’ve seen it strongly.”

In January 2018, Trump wrote on social media, “North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the ‘Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.’ Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!”

In April 2018, the FBI carried out search warrants on the law office and apartment of Michael Cohen, Trump’s personal attorney. In his comments on the investigation, Trump said, “It’s an attack on our country in a true sense. It’s an attack on what we all stand for.” This rhetoric fits with his general tendency to view anything that gets in his way as treasonous.



In a September 2018 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Trump said “In less than two years, my administration has accomplished more than almost any administration in the history of our country.” The crowd of world leaders laughed in response to that ridiculous statement. He later claimed, “They weren’t laughing at me, they were laughing with me.”

In January 2019, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat, had been scheduled to visit Afghanistan, where US troops have been involved in an ongoing war for nearly two decades. She was to take a military flight, consistent with the standard procedures for high-ranking officials traveling to war zones. At the last minute, Trump canceled Pelosi’s flight, in apparent retaliation for her suggestion that he should postpone his State of the Union speech due to the government shutdown.

In August 2019, after rumors surfaced that Trump had floated the idea of the US purchasing Greenland from Denmark, he told the press, “Well, Greenland, I don’t know—it got released somehow. It’s just something we talked about. Denmark essentially owns it. We’re very good allies with Denmark. We protect Denmark like we protect large portions of the world. So the concept came up and I said, certainly, I’d be—strategically, it’s interesting, and we’d be interested. But we’ll talk to them a little bit.” He did not mention the wishes of the people who live in Greenland. The Prime Minister of Denmark said, “Greenland is not for sale. Greenland is not Danish. Greenland belongs to Greenland. I strongly hope that this is not meant seriously.” (Greenland is an autonomous territory of Denmark with its own parliament.) Trump called her response “nasty” and abruptly canceled a scheduled visit to Denmark.

In December 2019, Trump wrote a letter to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi decrying his impeachment, in which he said that “More due process was afforded to those accused in the Salem Witch Trials.”

In March 2020, Congress passed a stimulus bill that included money for checks to be sent directly to most adults in the US. Trump insisted that his name should appear on the checks, despite the fact that IRS checks have never featured the president’s name in the past. Trump said, “I’m sure people will be very happy to get a big, fat, beautiful check and my name is on it.”

In July 2020, Trump asked his doctor to administer a test of his basic cognitive function. There is no way to perform exceptionally well on such a test; a perfect score is common. Nonetheless, Trump bragged about his performance as though it was a notable accomplishment. He said, “I actually took one very recently, when I was—the radical left were saying, is he all there, is he all there. And I proved that was all there because I aced it. I aced the test.” He continued by implausibly claiming that his doctors were “very surprised. They said that’s an unbelievable thing. Rarely does anybody do what you just did.” A few weeks later, he told a rambling story about the test in which he described remembering a string of five words after a delay, using the off-the-cuff example of “person, woman, man, camera, TV.” He said, “If you get it in order, you get extra points. They said nobody gets it in order. It’s actually not that easy but for me it was easy. And that’s not an easy question.” He claimed that his doctors said, “That’s amazing. How did you do that?”

Kristi Noem, the governor of South Dakota, said that Trump told her in 2018 that “it’s my dream to have my face on Mount Rushmore.” In August 2020, he denied that he had seriously suggested such a thing, but wrote, “based on all of the many things accomplished during the first 3 1/2 years, perhaps more than any other Presidency, sounds like a good idea to me!”

Later in August, he wrote a social media post instructing his supporters, “Don’t buy GOODYEAR TIRES - They announced a BAN ON MAGA HATS.” Goodyear had asked

employees not to wear clothing with explicitly partisan messages at work. Trump was responding to training materials from one specific Goodyear location which listed “Make America Great Again” (Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan) as not appropriate for work and, in contrast, listed “Black Lives Matter” (an anti-racism protest slogan) as appropriate for work.

Finally, in every televised debate so far, Trump has badgered, interrupted, and insulted people, in open defiance of the prearranged rules. In the third debate in 2016, he interrupted Clinton to blurt out “such a nasty woman” for no apparent reason. In the first debate in 2020, he shouted over Biden and the moderator incessantly—even more so than with Clinton four years earlier. At best it was petty bullying; at worst an attempt to trigger Biden’s well-known stutter.

## Conclusion

Trump is not an earnest leader with a dark side; he is an authoritarian bully whose core public identity is antithetical to truth, justice, and democracy. He is a calamity in plain sight. He framed the electoral process as fraudulent and refused to agree to accept its outcome unless he won. He openly decried checks on his power. He threatened his political opponents. He called for an “occupying force” of “heavily armed soldiers” to “dominate” and enact “retribution.” He encouraged his supporters to lash out violently. He tried to ban an entire religious group from immigrating to the US. He called Mexican immigrants “rapists” and nicknamed a deadly pathogen “the China virus.” He tore children from their families. He told American congresswomen of color to “go back” where they “came from.” He promoted and emboldened White supremacists. He lied so brazenly that he seemed to be making a case against the very concept of truth. He called the press “the enemy of the people.” He referred to education about the lasting effects of slavery as “ideological poison” and called for “patriotic education” in its place. He intentionally downplayed the severity of a pandemic and used his platform to discourage efforts to slow its spread. He does not merely say and do things that are wrong; he speaks and acts in ways that repudiate the idea of *ever* striving for truth, of *ever* choosing a course of action based on ethics rather than power or ego. As a role model, he says nothing and does nothing to encourage people to do the right thing or seek the right answer.

He has told us what he stands for over and over again—authoritarianism, bigotry, domination, retribution, petty grandstanding, cheap power trips, and the trappings of greatness. He stands for the feeling of superiority, whatever it costs. That feeling of superiority is what he means by “Make America Great Again.” He tells us daily from his own lips and social media accounts. It is inescapable. To support Trump in 2020 is to be unreasonable, unresponsive to new information, and uninterested in truth.

I am not claiming here that opponents of Trump are immune from being unreasonable. We all act unreasonably at times. However, current supporters of Trump have proven that they are willing to suspend reason for at least five years. To remain a Trump supporter is to have acted unreasonably in the face of his indefensible words and deeds not just once but over and over again. We can strive for a charitable interpretation—perhaps someone missed hearing about a cruel comment on one occasion, misinterpreted a lie on another—but such explanations only take us so far. Peter, we must confront the fact that supporting Trump is malicious. We must recognize that millions of people succumbed to maliciousness for more than just a moment—that millions of people embraced maliciousness. We must remember this dire fact, reckon with it, do our best to learn what we can from it.

Someday I will die and everything I have ever done to make myself feel superior will lose its purpose. Like Trump and his supporters, I have the capacity for cruelty and selfishness,

for “retribution” and “domination.” But what I stand to gain from those things is fleeting. The world has no use for my retribution once I am dead. What lasts is what I do to uplift others. Trump seems incapable of understanding that principle, and his supporters, at best, have set it aside for now. I am not writing this letter to excoriate them but to call attention to what they have done, because it feels like a warning that cannot be ignored.

I know some people who believed in 2016 that Trump could not possibly win. They were pleased that he secured the Republican nomination because they disliked the other Republican candidates and they felt that Trump would guarantee an election loss for the party. Let these events serve as a warning. No amount of transparent incompetence or evil makes someone impossible to elect, and it is foolish and dangerous to elevate the worst, even in a party you oppose.

I know others who believe that Trump’s presidency is a force for positive social change because he is so obviously cruel. They hope that experiencing Trump’s cruelty will force ordinary people to confront the problems in our political system and energize efforts to fix them once and for all. This line of reasoning is asinine. It is comparable to a doctor faced with a complex diagnosis saying, “I don’t know how to cure you, but I know your body needs to change, so I will try stabbing you at random with a knife and hope it works.” Peter, if somebody ever tries to tell you that an act of wanton destruction is a necessary step to a better society, ask them for evidence that people who share their vision would have any say at all in what gets rebuilt. Giving Trump a say certainly is not helping.

I know still other people who believe that Trump is *not* uniquely dangerous. They believe that other politicians share the worst of his authoritarian and bigoted impulses, but are “smart” enough to keep those impulses secret so that they can implement more adverse policy with less pushback. I know people who continue to hold this belief, in spite of the fact that Trump’s explicit rhetoric itself has disastrous consequences separate from policy, such as undermining trust in the electoral process, emboldening White supremacists, and reducing participation in efforts to mitigate COVID-19 transmission. Peter, do not fall for such convoluted rationalizations. When somebody like Trump reaches a position of extreme power, they present an exceptional danger. Most politicians who implement bad policies seem to sincerely believe that those policies will make the world better. Most are capable of responding productively to criticism—not often enough but at least occasionally. Trump does not reach even this minimal standard. No rationality holds him in check from utter recklessness.

I also know people who argue that Trump’s rise to power was inevitable and unsurprising because there is and has always been pervasive injustice. This way of thinking encourages complacency. We should not be rolling our eyes and calling Trump’s outrageous behavior “business as usual,” and we should not be holding up our cynicism as a marker of moral or intellectual superiority.

Finally, I know some people who are reluctant to trust any negative information about Trump, because they have fallen for his lies about “the press” conspiring to tear him down. Under Trump’s framework, we should decide whether to believe something on the basis of how it makes him appear, not on the basis of whether it is true. Peter, we are all susceptible to being more trusting of evidence that appears to support our prior beliefs, but Trump’s way of thinking turns this subtle human weakness into an outright ideology. To accept his dictum that only favorable press is trustworthy is to abandon any aspiration to truth.

We should expect our leaders to engage with evidence, to allow us to aspire to truth. Trump’s anti-evidence legacy has already undermined the hope for a more productive political

system. Our best hope is to hasten the sense that his public attitude toward evidence—his flippant disregard for bothering to figure things out—was an aberration. I assume that we all disagree with every political leader about at least one issue. In fact, I hope that we all disagree with every political leader about at least one issue, because such disagreement suggests that we are actually trying to think things through in the face of uncertainty. What we need is a leader who openly cares about evidence, who openly tries to get things right, even if they fail at times.

Peter, I wrote you this letter because I could not rest without articulating something of what it feels like to see Trump in power. I do not know what will happen after the election next month. I do not expect to persuade any Trump supporter to vote against him. I just want to take note in this moment of the overwhelming plainness of Trump's malignance, and I want to pass that observation on to you. I want you to understand how easy it was to know what Trump said and did, and I want you to know that millions of people cheered him on anyway. This knowledge itself is simple; the lessons that we can take from it are not. I cannot tell you what those lessons are, Peter, but I have faith that you can help us all to learn them.

From the past with love, trepidation, and hope,

Sara