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THE COMING DARK AGE

By Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

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It seems not only improbable, but impossible—the United States of America headed for a Dark Age, literally?

Yes, unmistakably. We're well into an age not only of corruption and collapse of functional democracy, but across-the-board degeneration of our institutions. It is hard to imagine, because we ordinarily experience institutions as if they're simply bricks and mortar, indestructible, except maybe by an earthquake or other natural disaster—not seeing that they are brought to life by what humans do. We have no living memory of their wholesale moral collapse, although we now see the institutional foundations of our society beginning to crumble, their managers and their policies and practices corrupted by a slide toward authoritarianism.

How can a Dark Age come to pass in a nation suffused with millions of dedicated fighters for truth, justice, and compassion?

We are being challenged not only by the titans of industry and Wall Street, but a highly organized malevolent brotherhood of billionaires and emerging trillionaires. They have masterminded the assault on our institutional bulwarks, underwriting and marshalling a vast legion of politicized and corporatized sycophants and hirelings, who already have innumerable triumphs to their discredit:

- They have destroyed the vision and path of public education as the backbone of informed and responsible citizenship.
- They have transformed the judiciary, so that now it is monetized, largely a tool of the wealthy; racialized, meting out blatantly biased verdicts against minorities; and economized, routinely denying justice to the impoverished.
- They have attacked the universal franchise with every conceivable stratagem, most not even thinly disguised, to suppress the votes of minorities, students, ex-convicts, and the poor.
- They have corrupted a significant proportion of state and federal legislators, both Democratic and Republican, with “dark money” and the promise of future position, possessions, privileges, and power

as their reward for supporting legislation that betrays the commonweal.

- They have transformed the fourth estate into a cacophony of ideological fact-bashing that leaves the citizenry highly polarized or disgusted to the point of chronic disinterest in public affairs, with even the mainstream media barely recognizable, having become an unapologetic advocate for the worst policies of neoliberalism.

Of course, withal, our organizing—community, congregational, labor, and identity- and issue-based—will not stop working to reduce the worst effects of what's happening in the country. So why reject the hope that we can persist in opposition, mobilize mass demonstrations, organize a unified progressive national movement to combat poverty, oppression, and injustice, and mount national campaigns to inspire the country with a shared vision and a path to renewal? Why reject the optimism of liberals, progressives, and radicals, that we can still win elections to regain control of the government?

Given what we are witnessing, the answer is daunting.

We Americans mostly still believe in the nation's ideals and their ultimate realization, whatever our politics. For us, the toughest challenge of the dire future is that our faith, our hopefulness about humankind, neither comprehends nor is equipped to countervail the evil now arrayed against us. Whether on a city council in Iowa, in a New York corporate office, on the production line in a Tennessee auto factory, in an Oregon university faculty office, in an Army barracks in Arizona, or on a produce truck in California's Salinas Valley, our citizens do not imagine senior public officials repeatedly implementing policies they know will cause the suffering and death of hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of us.

But our eyes do not deceive us, even if our brains are boggled struggling to fully digest the meaning of current events. What is happening is not simply the outcome of one madman and his henchmen, what George Will calls a “gangster regime,” but the conniving of an entire political party. Unfortunately, removing

Trump is only the end of the beginning of the darkness that's coming, not the beginning of its end. Trump will go away, but the reactionary Republican officeholders and the extraordinarily powerful billionaires for whom they shill, who own most of the country and its wealth, they are not going away; they will continue their corruption of our institutions with all their resources until they are politically and economically dethroned.

Our citizens do not imagine that the brotherhood of billionaires sees the present crisis as their once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to finally achieve their dream of more than a century to transform this bottom-up electoral democracy into a top-down oligarchic empire. The pandemic is a perfect opportunity for them, because it has the same effect as their reactionary voter suppression efforts, perverting elections to achieve greater control of the public powers of all three branches of government. They fully understand that the pandemic disproportionately kills liberal-voting minorities. They have neither compunctions nor conscience about openly promoting policies that cause thousands of deaths.

How far will they go to destroy the historic American experiment in democracy? Like so many other greedy and grasping moguls before them, they will not hesitate to bring on another Dark Age. They have no fear of suffering personally from the institutional and eventual societal collapse they have been precipitating. They have every reason to believe that as their power and wealth grow, so too will the quality of their health care, the luxury of their homes, automobiles, and yachts, the value of the education received by their children, the acumen and ethical indifference of their lawyers, and their favorable treatment by courts and legislatures. Whatever happens, they can choose to live in Switzerland, Paris, London, or on the Riviera. If we want to see how far they will go, we need only look to the darkness brought on by the fascist Syrian and North Korean regimes, including: physical devastation, denial of human rights, detention without trial, and mass murder of innocents.

But isn't it likely that after four years of Trumpism, the citizenry of the United States will wake up, reclaim control of the government from the billionaire brotherhood, and move us into a new era of progressivism?

Certainly, that's our hope. But I fear it's a case of "hope springs infernal," because it deludes us. The threat has become inexorable since the Congress, the judiciary, and the fourth estate have been corrupted, no longer recognizable as the *government of the people*, and the corruption is accelerating. The grotesque imbalance of power, institutionalized in law, is now a free-wheeling driver of ever-widening political, economic, and social inequality in our personal and institutional life.

But even these circumstances are not the most discouraging we face.

We have overwhelming evidence that the hope of a mass movement rising up to countervail the corruption has been sabotaged by the far-reaching effects of corporate consolidations, which have given rise to Big Food, Big Pharma, Big Chem, Big Porn, and Big Tech. The most obvious outcome has been market domination across many sectors of the American economy by a handful of global corporations. Through masterful control of information-media, marketing, and manufacturing, they have become exceptionally profitable by promoting products that induce *addiction*—reinforcing usage by giving immediate pleasure, while simultaneously building tolerance so that greater amounts are required to achieve the same neurological effect—and which are *toxic* when overused.

These products, wildly popular for their pleasurable effects, include: sugar, which has been a major contributor to premature sickness and death, while simultaneously creating disabling personal and institutional debt by driving metabolic syndrome diseases (e.g., diabetes and heart disease) to epidemic levels; alcohol and drugs, which have been remorseless contributors to the failure of family life and public education, especially for minorities and the poor; pornography, which has become a nearly unlimited source of income for organized crime, and which poisons the lives of thousands of vulnerable young people annually and corrupts our evidence-based understanding of healthy sexuality; and electronic devices, which ironically provide a compelling method of social networking while they play a pernicious role in the loss of face-to-face socio-emotional bonding that now characterizes much of family and community life, which traditionally have been the most dependable seedbeds of personal and civic morality, responsible citizenship, and resistance to corruption.

Beyond all their other harm, the existential impact of these toxic addictions is that they entail corresponding vulnerability of the citizenry to reactionary political and economic manipulation. It is the modern version of Rome's appeasing the plebeians by giving them "bread and circuses." But now recreational chemicals and endless entertainment divert the attention of the people, not only from the decimation of their institutions, but from their personal disempowerment, sickness, and death.

Is there no hope? Is there no way this great nation can avoid the looming Dark Age?

If there is a ray of hope, sensibleness should tell us it is *not* that the coming time of intense suffering will be avoided, but instead that we have the wherewithal to limit its duration to decades rather than centuries. However, if we are to achieve that more optimistic outcome, we must not allow our enervation at the thought of where we are headed prompt us to merely continue what we have been doing all along, hoping and praying that the darkness somehow will not come, which is

much like hoping and praying that COVID-19 will fade away.

But surely the darkness has already begun. And, given its historical causes, commonsense should tell us that it will only end when the institutions of democracy are rebuilt from the grassroots: when we the people, mindful of our *citizenship*, declare our inalienable public rights, roles, and resources; when, in tens of thou-

sands of directly democratic neighborhood public assemblies, we discuss and decide how we will use our public powers and resources to remake the governance of our neighborhoods, our cities, our states, and our nation.

When we pledge our lives, our treasure, and our sacred honor to that cause, the era of darkness must begin to end.

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